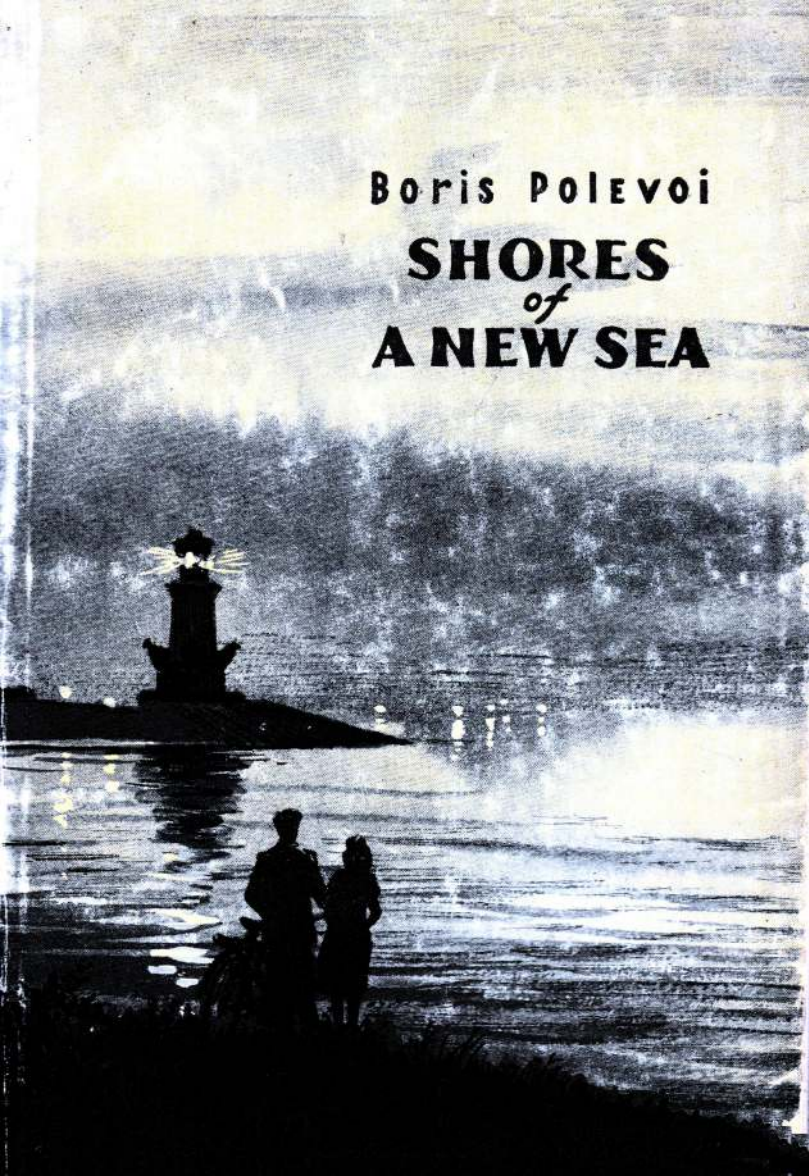
Boris Polevoi

SHORES of A NEW SEA



Shores of a New Sea by B. Polevoi is a book of short stories about Soviet patriots, builders of the Volga-Don Canal and other great construction projects carried out under the Five-Year Plan of the post-war period. The stories in this book, "Student," "Love," "Steeple-Jack," "Unusual Concert," "Shores of a New Sea" and "Historic Sounds," are part of Polevoi's *Contemporaries*, a larger collection of his short stories.

"*Contemporaries*," Polevoi writes, "is a collection of stories about people whose life, work and deeds, all the more glorious through being a part of the ordinary and habitual, best reflect life in this country today. In writing about them I have coloured nothing and concealed nothing, leaving, in the majority of cases, even their names unchanged and giving fictitious names only to those of them who modestly requested it."

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BORIS POLEVOI

SHORES OF A NEW SEA

Short Stories

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE
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TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN
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CONTENTS

	Page
A FAIRY-TALE	5
STUDENT .	23
LOVE . .	33
STEEPLE-JACK	52
FOG	74
CONSULTATION .	88
UNUSUAL CONCERT .	104
SHORES OF A NEW SEA	118
HISTORIC SOUNDS .	137

A FAIRY-TALE

Ekaterina Fyodorovna Yakovleva, professor at one of Moscow's medical institutes, whose research in the field of tuberculosis had won her wide renown in recent years, was going to a summer resort. She decided to stop and visit her daughter Zhenya on her way there.

Mother and daughter not only loved each other dearly, but were close friends. However, as is often the case, being busy with their lives, they had not seen each other for several years. Ekaterina Fyodorovna knew all about Zhenya's life through her letters. She knew that Zhenya and her husband, hydraulic engineers both, were now at one of the great construction projects on the Volga. She knew of all the worries, joys and tribulations of Zhenya's work. But every time Ekaterina Fyodorovna sat down to think over a letter received from her daughter, she pictured

Zhenya as a child, a thin, sprightly, long-legged schoolgirl, or as the pretty, fair-haired student she had later become; never could she see her as an engineer of a huge construction project.

Six years ago Zhenya had written from the Urals that a daughter had been born to her. She sent a snap-shot of a lusty, naked infant and a lock of black, fluffy hair and said that the little girl had been named Alyona. The snap-shot was passed from hand to hand, travelling all over the clinic. As for Ekaterina Fyodorovna, she was unusually absent-minded that day, would stop without any apparent cause, in the middle of what she was doing to breathe the words "grand-daughter" and "grandma," smile and shrug her shoulders.

This had happened long ago. And now, when the car stopped at a little house with the red tiled roof built low in the southern manner and sloping over the windows, Ekaterina Fyodorovna was filled with a dismay she had never before experienced: she was about to come face to face with a little being unknown to her, whose coming into the world had made her a grandmother.

The door flew open with a crash. A large Alsatian and a tiny, dark-eyed little girl in a print frock with a huge red bow in her wavy

luxuriant hair rushed down together from the small terrace overhung with bright greenery. Making an incredible racket, they raced down the narrow path and out of the front garden gates, but stopped still when they reached the car. The huge dog sat back on its haunches, casting a jealous eye at the little girl who, flushed and panting, stared without blinking at Ekaterina Fyodorovna. Her large brown eyes expressed surprise and incredulity.

"That's your grandmother," said Zhenya who had followed her mother out of the car. "Kiss her, darling."

"Alyona," said the little girl primly, introducing herself and stretching out her hand with its long, slender fingers to her grandmother, who at once defined them to herself as "surgical."

Then, with a conspiratorial look at her dog, the little girl said with a snicker:

"You aren't really a grandma, are you?"

Not knowing what to reply, Ekaterina Fyodorovna glanced back at her daughter. Zhenya was smiling slyly.

"You don't look like a grandma," little Alyona stated confidently, adding for further emphasis, "Tamara Zaitseva has a real grandma. Her grandma's old and wears glasses."

Immersed in her work, Ekaterina Fyodorovna had not come in contact with children for a long time. She was quite at a loss when that same evening, Zhenya and her husband went to a Party meeting and left Alyona in her care.

Alyona, on the contrary, accustomed to having her parents' friends and colleagues stay the night with them whenever they came on business trips, was entirely at her ease. Seating herself opposite Ekaterina Fyodorovna, she began to entertain her with stories of the construction project, which was "the biggest you ever saw." She showed her her dolls and teddy-bears who, it appeared, were all busy building something out of bricks and clay. Convinced, to her astonishment, that her strange grandmother understood nothing about construction and remembering that her mother had told her that she was a very, very famous doctor, the little girl changed the subject. She told Ekaterina Fyodorovna about the time she had had a sore throat that autumn and explained how she had been treated.

Then, unexpectedly even for herself, she climbed up on her grandmother's knee, put one slim brown arm round her neck and insisted on hearing a fairy-tale.

"What kind of a fairy-tale, dear?" Ekaterina Fyodorovna asked, nonplussed.

"Any kind. There's lots of good stories. Tell me a good one, Grandma."

There ensued an embarrassing silence. "What shall I tell her?" thought Ekaterina Fyodorovna. Her own childhood, now so distant, suddenly loomed up before her. Her mother, a laundress, had gone out daily to people's houses to do their washing. This work would so exhaust her that often on coming home at the end of the day, she had dozed off at the table just as her daughter was getting her belated supper out of the stove. Ekaterina Fyodorovna herself had from the age of six been left in charge of her baby brother. By the time she was eight, she had already begun to help her mother with the wash she took in. Always there were blows and abuse and a constant gnawing emptiness in her stomach; it was this that she recollected now, and not one, not a single fairy-tale. And Zhenya, Zhenya had heard her fill of fairy-tales at the day-nursery and kindergarten. Ekaterina Fyodorovna had always been too busy to read any. She had worked and studied all through Zhenya's childhood, first attending the Likbez* courses

* Likbez—special courses organized after the revolution to liquidate illiteracy among adults.—*Tr.*

for beginners, then night classes, later a school for workers and, finally, college.

"Grandma, please, Grandma!" Alyona was saying, shaking her grandmother impatiently.

"What shall I do?" thought Ekaterina Fyodorovna, her embarrassment growing. "Perhaps she'd like one of Pushkin's fairy-tales?"

And she began in cheerful tones:

"There once lived an old man and an old woman——"

"On the shores of the blue, blue sea," Alyona cut in pitilessly. "I know that one! It's about a golden fish. Tell me another one, Granny!"

"All right," Ekaterina Fyodorovna agreed hurriedly. She began to feel strangely oppressed in the presence of this little girl.

She divined her grand-daughter's surprise. Other little girls and boys had real grandmothers, grandmothers who wore glasses, knitted stockings, watched over their grandchildren to see that they ate more and, of course, from time to time told them delightful fairy-tales. And here was a grandmother who had made her appearance for the first time in a person's life and who could not do any of those things. Ekaterina Fyodorovna sadly

sensed a kind of void, an emptiness in her own life that, always busy with her numerous activities, she had formerly neglected to notice. Together with this came a passionate desire to win this little heart at any cost, to tell Alyona a story she would enjoy, to be no worse than other grandmothers.

"Tsar Dodon from early age," she began, less confidently now.

"Was more stern than he was sage," Alyona echoed, politely covering her mouth with her hand to hide a yawn. "They read that one to us at the kindergarten. It's by Pushkin, too. Don't you know any new fairy-tales? Tell me a small one, Granny, a teeny-weeny one."

And Alyona held up the tip of her little finger to illustrate what she meant. She no longer shook her grandmother. She looked into her eyes, and her gaze expressed not surprise or reproach, but only a child's frank disappointment. Ekaterina Fyodorovna felt a dull ache in her heart.

Omitting the "once upon a time, and a very good time it was," the usual introduction to a fairy-tale, that was on the tip of her tongue, she recklessly began her story without herself knowing just what would be in it and how it would end.

"Right here, my dear, where your mother and father are building their power plant, the front once passed."

As she said these words, Ekaterina Fyodorovna was overcome with a nervousness that surpassed any she had felt when mounting the rostrum of an international congress.

"When we fought against the fascists?" Alyona hastened to ask, fidgeting about in her grandmother's lap in an effort to settle herself more comfortably.

"No, long before. Many years ago. During the civil war. On one side of the front lay the Red lines, and on the other, the White."

"Why do you call them white? Did they wear white?"

"No, dear. That's what they called the army that fought against the people, for the tsar."

"Tsar Dodon?"

The question called for an answer. In the simplest possible terms Ekaterina Fyodorovna told her grand-daughter what the Reds had fought for and what the Whites; she likewise explained who the tsar was—not a fairy-tale tsar, but a real one—and who were the landlords, factory-owners and merchants.

Reputed in her youth to be a good agitator, Ekaterina Fyodorovna now discovered to her

joy that she was being listened to attentively, as if she were not telling what she had retained in her memory but were taking her out of a world of reality into a world that was fantastic, obscure and terrifying. Alyona did not at once grasp everything she was told. Learning, for instance, that the landlords and factory owners appropriated what was produced by the workers and peasants, Alyona wanted to know why these people who took what didn't belong to them were not arrested by the militia. This called for a new explanation. But the main thing was attained. Contact was established, and the little girl's interest aroused.

Now that she had opened for Alyona a door into a world of the past and the little girl sat listening, her eyes round and shining, Ekaterina Fyodorovna went confidently on with her story.

"And so, my dear, here is where the front passed. The Whites were attacking the Reds. They wanted to take the rich grain lands away from them so that the workers in Moscow and other towns would starve to death. The Reds knew of this and they fought with all their might. And the workers in the towns occupied by the Whites tried to help the Reds. There were Communists among them who worked underground. This doesn't mean that

they lived and worked under the ground. Don't think that, dear."

"I don't. They were like Oleg Koshevoi, weren't they?" Alyona supplied condescendingly.

"That's right. They were like Oleg, only older. They were grown-up people and there were many of them. Well, it so happened that the Red commanders had to get a very important letter into one of the towns. The letter contained a plan which told those in the underground movement and all the workers, too, how to help the Red troops when they approached the town. It was very difficult to deliver the letter. The Whites were on the look-out for such things. When they caught one of the Reds, they would torture and then kill him."

"Like the fascists?"

"Yes, like the fascists. The Red commander thought and thought but he couldn't make up his mind whom to send. The Whites seized every man who was of army age. What was to be done? It was then that one of the junior commanders, a young Baltic sailor, said: 'Why don't you send Katya, Comrade Commander?' Katya was the sailor's wife. The commander was taken aback by this suggestion. 'Katya?' he said, 'why, Katya has a tiny baby on her

hands.' But the sailor, not at all put out, replied that this was all to the good, for whc would suspect a woman with a baby."

"And who was this Katya, Granny?"

"She was in the Red Army, too, a soldier. She had worked at a factory before, and when the revolution began she joined the Red Guards, and she and this sailor fought side by side against the Whites. While in the ranks, they got married and a daughter was born to them. And so, my dear, when the commander called Katya and explained to her how things stood and asked if she would undertake to deliver the letter, she said yes, she'd do it since the revolution demanded it. She had been wearing boots and a tunic, but now she changed into an expensive dress, a fur coat and overshoes. She was supplied with false papers and was to play the role of the wife of a White officer on her way with her baby to join her husband in the town. She took her little girl in her arms, and they were driven to a large railroad station beyond the front lines where a ticket was bought for them. Katya was to ride in a coach in which only land-owners and factory-owners had travelled before."

"Wasn't she ashamed to ride with land-owners?"

"She was only doing it, darling, to trick the Whites and make them think that she was a fine lady."

"What happened then, Granny?"

Ekaterina Fyodorovna laughed. Now that the key to the child's heart was in her hands, she found it easy to go on with her story.

"What did the Whites do when Katya got into the coach for fine ladies?" Alyona broke in.

"Well, she sat down there, holding her little daughter in her arms, when suddenly the door opened and a White officer came in."

"Oh! A White officer?"

"Yes. A captain. And it turned out that his seat was just opposite Katya's. Katya was more dead than alive. She had been a nurse in the Red Army, a signal operator and a machine-gunner. She had seen a great many Whites, only they had all been dead and this one was alive. He was a young officer and he was sitting in the seat just across from her, smoking a cigarette and twirling his moustache, trying to get a friendly look from Katya."

"Didn't he see that she was a Red?"

"No, he didn't, sweetie. But that made it no easier for Katya. She squeezed herself into

a corner so that he wouldn't notice how she was trembling. What if he guessed who she was, searched her and found the letter? And indeed he soon saw that something was amiss and asked what was the matter and why she was so pale. And Katya said, 'I'm a little dizzy, Captain. It must be from the smoke, I can't stand smoke.' He apologized and stepped outside to finish his cigarette and Katya's hand went searching for the letter. She was afraid she might have lost it."

"Where did she have it?"

"She had hidden it in her baby's clothes between the diaper and the blanket."

"What if the Whites found it there?"

"They would kill both her and the baby. Meanwhile, the train went speeding ahead and they were nearing the town when suddenly they came to a halt in the middle of the steppe and a voice cried out: 'Everyone keep your seat! Check-up!' Katya's heart was in her throat. What if they noticed that her papers were false? She could contain herself no longer and burst into tears. And the captain in her compartment——"

"The White one?"

"Yes, the White one. He tried to reassure her, begging her not to cry, for, he said, 'Those are our men examining the passengers'

papers, they are on the look-out for Reds. There's nothing to be afraid of.' But all his attempts at soothing her only served to terrify Katya the more. She could hear someone being dragged out of the coach, someone else swearing and a man shouting: 'Long live the Commune!' Then there was the sound of steps in the corridor of Katya's coach, a knock at a neighbouring door, and a voice saying, 'No panic, please, ladies and gentlemen. We are looking for Red spies. Show your papers.' "

"Katya was like the little girl in the robbers' hut, wasn't she, Granny, hiding there and seeing and hearing everything?"

"That's right. Only Katya had far more reason to be frightened. She thought of her husband and of how he wouldn't even know that she was dead. She held her baby very close and decided that if it was her fate to die, then she would die as befitted a member of the Komsomol. She would spit in the eye of these Whites and cry out 'The Revolution will triumph!' and she would not plead for mercy for either herself or her baby daughter. She sat there, squaring her accounts with life, and feeling the suspicious glance of the captain fixed on her face; he had noticed that something was wrong with her."

Alyona had pressed up very close to her grandmother. For the first time in her life her little being was stirred not by the woes of her fairy-tale namesake Alyona drowned by a mean stepmother, nor by those of a princess falling into a trance-like sleep through the wiles of an evil magician; here were a living mother and her tiny baby and she was feeling for and with them.

The narrator herself was as excited as her listener. Her full, large face, which still bore traces of serene Russian beauty, flushed red. Her voice trembled.

"Well, what happened then?" Alyona prompted. After a brief pause, Ekaterina Fyodorovna continued:

"Then the White patrol came in and asked to see their papers. They looked at the captain's first, and Katya felt she would faint then and there. She thought her end had come. They'd see how nervous she was, take a close look at her passport and arrest her. Her life would end before it had really begun, just when it was beginning to offer so much! She would not be there to see what would come after the victory over the Whites, of which she and her husband had dreamt in their rare hours of rest between battles. She thought, too, that now she would never deliver the plan to the

Communist underground and the Red troops would be left without the support they needed in their offensive and, besides herself, many fine people would lose their lives.

"These thoughts made her realize that she would need every ounce of her strength. She was no longer afraid, had regained her presence of mind and listened no more for the shots that rang out outside. When the patrol approached her, she gave her little daughter to the officer, together with the blanket in which the letter was hidden, to hold while she took out her papers; then she unhurriedly handed over her false passport and even summoned up enough courage to ask the patrol whether there was any possibility of buying some milk at the station."

"What did she need the milk for?"

"She pretended to want it for her baby. She was trying to outwit them, to divert their attention so they wouldn't examine her papers too thoroughly. It's generally the case, my dear, that when a person strives after something good and wants to succeed badly enough, he wins through.

"The patrol didn't detain Katya, and when they arrived at the station the officer carried her bag for her to a cab driver. Katya was pretty and he liked her."

"Did the underground men get the plan?"

"What do you think! Katya paid off the cabby several blocks from where they were quartered. She walked into a yard, passed through it into another, and reached the neighbouring street. Only then did she make for the address she wanted."

"What did she walk around like that for?"

"So that the Whites could not trail her. And when she had reached her own people and delivered her message, her knees gave way and she collapsed."

"Why was that, Granny?"

"She didn't know why, herself. Probably because of how frightened she'd been on her own and her baby's account."

"Were the underground men pleased?"

"Of course they were! They began to prepare for the offensive and very soon, when the Red troops moved up, the Whites were attacked simultaneously from both sides and driven from the town."

"And Katya?"

"Katya was all right. She had done her part. Her sailor husband joined her and the baby in town. He was terribly glad that they were alive and well and had done such a good job."

"And then they had a feast and made merry and drank ale and mead, didn't they, Granny?" Alyona put in slyly.

"No, my dear, there was no time for such things then. Not all the Whites had been defeated yet. There was still much fighting ahead. Only today can we make merry, when——"

Ekaterina Fyodorovna broke off her narrative with a start. Her daughter had come quickly into the room.

"Why didn't you ever tell me this fairy-tale, Mother?" she asked.

"You heard me?"

"Yes. We came back half an hour ago. I was sitting in the dining-room by the door and listening. Tell me, Mother, was Katya's little girl called Zhenya? She was, wasn't she?"

Ekaterina Fyodorovna nodded silently.

Little Alyona had already recovered from the impression her grandmother's story had made on her and was looking askance now at her mother and now at Ekaterina Fyodorovna, without understanding what they were so excited about. Grown-ups were funny!

STUDENT

It was night, and a report on the work done that day at all the various sectors of the huge construction site had been sent in to the Administration Office housed in a low, squat building. At that late hour, the head of the project, a leading Soviet engineer, was calling a conference with the district heads, as well as his closest associates, in order to discuss the most urgent tasks for the next day. At the construction project, these brief nightly sessions were called, jokingly, the "sittings of the War Council." The name was one they well deserved, for there was about the construction site an atmosphere of intense activity, such as is generally associated with an offensive. A labour offensive, and a peaceful one, it was carried on day and night, ever growing and expanding.

Well, it was at that late hour that we asked the construction head to give us a guide who

would escort us to one of the building sectors where important developments were expected in the morning. The construction head passed his large, strong hand, the hand of a worker, across his high forehead.

"I think you'll probably have to do without a guide," he said thoughtfully, "I'll want my whole staff at the conference. However——" here a mischievous twinkle appeared for a moment in the calm, grey depths of his eyes. "However, I think I have just the person you need. I could lend him to you for a while. Keeps his word, too. Only——"

He rang and, addressing the elderly secretary who had noiselessly appeared at the door, said:

"Please ask the 'student' in here for a moment. If he's gone home, send the car for him." And, turning to us, he added: "There's one condition. Don't show your surprise or embarrass your guide with personal questions. I'll explain everything to you myself later."

The speaker's tired face retained its expression of business-like reserve, but his eyes laughed frankly now.

Just then the door opened, and from behind the curtains covering it there appeared the puny figure of a boy in a quilted jacket several sizes too large for him and looking

like the upper part of a diving-suit. The sleeves of the jacket were so long that turning them up had not, as it seemed, been enough; for they were rolled up. The new arrival could not have been more than fourteen years old. His face was unusually grave and this gave it an adult look, oddly at variance with the pug nose heavily sprinkled with large golden freckles, the childish down on the cheeks, the full lips.

"I'd like you to meet Konstantin Yermolenko, our 'student.' You'll show these comrades over the grounds, Kostya. They'll want to see everything."

The strange "student" remained unperturbed. He apparently found nothing unusual in fulfilling such orders. He boyishly pulled down his jacket and said imposingly:

"Very well. Follow me."

Our extraordinary guide proved to be worth his weight in gold. He was prepared for all our questions, and answered every one intelligently.

He knew the construction project inside out, knew the very things about it that could interest new-comers who wanted to learn something about the work. He had an amazing memory, but his sense of responsibility was too strong to allow him to trust his memory implicitly; he would occasionally dip into his

pocket, pull out a much worn and soiled notebook and look into it to verify names and figures. But what particularly endeared him to one was his thinking and speaking of the project as of something that was very precious to him and of which he was an integral part.

He knew this to be our first visit here, was indulgent toward us and considered himself bound to give his explanations in as simple a manner as he could.

Thus we learned that the alluvial deposit resembles a mountain range and that if all the metal reinforcements used on the site were put end to end, we would get a steel band long enough to girdle half the globe.

Our young guide was known at the construction site and was evidently quite popular there. The engineers we met on the way said "hello" to him, grinning as they did so, and the driver of a heavy lorry for carrying concrete stepped on the brakes as he came alongside of us and, leaning out of the cab, yelled:

"You going to the workers' town, Konstantin Nikolayevich? Hop in, I'll give you a lift to the concrete plant."

When we had mounted to the edge of the dam and down below us the lights of the construction site shone out as brilliantly as

the myriad stars of autumn reflected in black water, our young guide waxed truly poetic.

By signs he alone could discern, he picked out the outlines of structures in this galaxy of lights and spoke of them as though he clearly saw, spreading out before him, a boundless sea created by man, the lights of beacons at the ends of breakwaters, an outer harbour where the ships of five seas entered, shelters to protect ships in a storm and the ships themselves, lifted and lowered at man's will. His heart was so full of all this that in the darkness that engulfed the dry, pitted face of the steppe, he really saw the structures which then existed only on blueprints and drafts. When he spoke of what he saw, pointing here and there with his thin, boyish, ink-spotted finger, his face, with its bizarre pattern of freckles, expressed such joy and faith that one could not help admiring it.

We kept our word. And, although our young enthusiast interested us more and more, we refrained from personal questions. When it was time to say good-bye, we thanked him warmly for his help and for having explained everything so well and made, without delay, for the construction head's office, the windows of which were still lighted.

"Well?" he asked, as he raised his eyes from the papers on his desk.

"Marvellous!"

"That's not what I'm talking about. I know it. I mean the 'student.' How did you like him?"

"For God's sake tell us where you got him. He's wonderful."

A sly and kindly twinkle appeared again in the builder's tired eyes.

"He is, isn't he? He's only fourteen. Kids of his age raid their mother's cupboard for jam. And he is a living encyclopaedia of the construction project: knows everything, is interested in everything."

"Why do you call him 'student'?"

The builder took some time to go through his papers, then, as though deciding that the work-day, which had dragged out till nearly daybreak, was finished, pushed them away and began to tell us, unhurriedly and with genuine relish, the story of Konstantin Yermolenko whom everyone at the construction project, even the senior staff, called "student."

Surprisingly, there proved to be nothing out of the ordinary about the story. The great construction projects attract multitudes of people these days from all corners of the country. Some are moved by the noble desire to do

their share in putting up a great historic structure; others are drawn by the ardour and romance of creative labour; still others believe that here they will have an opportunity of better revealing their talents; others yet are anxious to master new and hitherto unknown trades and operate giant new machines; there are those, too, who are lured by the possibility of getting big money. The personnel departments are kept busy answering stacks of written applications daily. Scores of people are specially assigned for the job of interviewing and putting to work those who arrive without advance appointments.

It was among the latter that Konstantin Yermolenko arrived, the son of a soldier killed in the battles for Rostov during the Great Patriotic War.

After six years of school, he decided he would like to build the Volga-Don Canal, and the very first day school was out, caught a boat there, taking along his report card with high credits in all subjects. He had no ticket and was put off at the nearest landing-place. But the reverses he suffered en route served in no way to depress the boy's spirits. From then on he hitchhiked and, when he had reached the construction site, went directly to the offices of the personnel department. When they

refused to consider his request for the obvious reason that he was too young, he got through to the department head and showed him his report card and the leading article from a Komsomol paper which called on the young people to lend their efforts to help in the country's great construction projects. But the article which had thrilled the boy made no impression on the department head, who remained implacable. However, even this new set-back failed to damp the boy's enthusiasm. He made his way into the rooms of the Administration Board and reached the office of the head of the project himself.

"My secretary came in to tell me there was someone outside asking for me," the head of the project proceeded, the kindly, warm expression of his eyes forming a singular contrast with his immobile and tired face and his cool, business-like tone. "I told her that she knew very well it was not my job to hire people. Now I must tell you that my secretary is a woman of character with no sentimental streak anywhere in her. And there she was repeating her request in a voice that actually trembled. I saw that this was no ordinary case and told her I would see him. Now he wears an oversized quilted jacket so as to look older, but then he was such a little boy. But he held

himself with dignity and complained about his having been refused employment here. 'What did you expect?' I said. 'You were born five years too late, that's all.' Then he handed me his report card and the Komsomol paper that was all frayed with the wear and tear it had got, and I realized that his urge to join us was all but desperate. I admit that he had very nearly won me over, but I said, just the same, that there was no need to rush and that he had everything ahead of him, a whole life to live, and the first thing to do was to go back to school. 'There'll be a plane for Rostov taking off from here tomorrow,' I said, 'I'm going to put you on board and send you home. You've never travelled by plane before, have you? Well, here's your chance.' But he wanted none of it. Very reasonably, but resolutely, he said, 'You have students practising here, haven't you? Why can't you take me on as a probationer, just for the holidays?' That decided me. Come what may, I thought, I'll do it, I'll take him on in spite of the rules! I engaged him as a messenger boy. How he was promoted and put in charge of special errands, I don't know, it just happened. He's a smart lad. And his memory is remarkable!"

Just before dawn we left the dark building and walked out into the streets of the new

town that had recently sprung up in the steppe. The famous builder, taking hungry gulps of the fresh air that had the slightly bitter smell of wormwood, said with a dreamy smile:

"The things such kids will accomplish when they grow up and become men!"

LOVE

"Take a look at that couple over there eating at the table in the corner. Take a good look. This isn't the place to speak about it, but I'll tell you a rather curious story about them if you drop in to see me later."

Ivan Fyodorovich Kuzmichov, Secretary of the Party Bureau of our building district, has an amazing intuition about people. He can always find something interesting in every person however ordinary that person may seem. Knowing this gift of his, I let my glance stray to the two Kuzmichov had pointed out.

The man was dark and thin, with thick, curly, greying hair, a sharp profile ending in a somewhat heavy, prominent chin, high cheekbones and deep lines rutting both sides of his mouth. He plied his knife and fork with silent concentration, as though intent on some task. The woman was a stately blonde, with a large face to which her dark eyebrows meeting together gave a stern and energetic look.

There was nothing striking about her appearance except, perhaps, for the overalls that she wore.

But in the woman's whole bearing and especially in the attentiveness with which she handed now the mustard, now the horse-radish or pepper to her companion, there was something possessive, something maternal.

It was clear that here in this dining-hall, filled with a host of builders, the woman was known and deferred to. There was an air of easy assurance about her that showed she was accustomed to general respect.

That evening Kuzmichov and I met in the room belonging to the Party Bureau. The room was not large and resembled the office of a building engineer. Everywhere, on the desk, book-shelves and window-sills, on the steel top of the safe, there were jars of cement, samples of earth and models of various instruments.

Kuzmichov waved me to a seat on the imitation leather sofa and sat down beside me, tucking up his legs under him like a boy. The face he turned to me was no longer young, and was lit by a smile, a sly smile that wrinkled the corners of his mouth, shone in his eyes and seemed to lurk in every line.

"A picturesque couple, aren't they?" he began, "and now prepare to hear my story. I

must say, it's quite unusual. You've already heard about the man. I mentioned him when I spoke about our labour heroes. He is Yegor Ustinov, a leader of a team of concrete workers. And, of course, you've heard about the woman. She's Lyubov Chaban and, as one of the older of our foremen calls her, 'a little lady with a big voice.' She also heads a team of concrete workers, and just last month her team took the Challenge Banner away from Yegor's. Both Lyubov and Yegor are Party members."

Kuzmichov rubbed his hands with undisguised satisfaction.

"Aha, I see I've got you interested. I told you we have people here one'd never get tired of talking or hearing about. Well, to get back to those two. Yegor Ustinov arrived here with the first party of builders straight from the Dnieper. He helped reconstruct the Dnieper Hydro-Electric Power Plant, won fame there, was awarded an Order and came directly to us as soon as he'd wound up his affairs. Well, we let him have the honour of launching our concrete-placing work. It was he who laid the first cubic feet of concrete at the foundation of the dam. A picture of Ustinov was printed on the cover of a magazine. That picture was what got things started. That's

the key to the whole story. About a fortnight after that magazine appeared, a woman I'd never seen before came here to the Party Bureau. She said she was Lyubov Chaban, a Party member, sent to work at the Medical Centre here as a nurse.

"I had a talk with her and was soon convinced that she was a good Communist. She had secondary education, had finished medical courses, had been in the war, been wounded and decorated, and she had joined the Party at the front. After the end of the war, she had been demobilized, had returned to her native Ukraine and been active in children's welfare work on a big collective farm there. In a word, she impressed me as a truly fine and capable person. As I spoke to her I kept turning over in my mind the conversation I had recently had with the head of the building district about our day-nursery for children. Things there were not going any too smoothly. We just couldn't find the right person to handle the job.

"I asked Lyubov Chaban whether she would agree to undertake it. 'All right, I don't mind, if you think it's necessary. I haven't come here to take things easy, but to work where I'm most needed. I only hope my skill will be up to my strength.' I liked her answer

very much. When she had said good-bye and was half-way to the door, Lyubov Chaban suddenly turned to me.

"'Can you tell me if Ustinov works here, Yegor Ustinov?' she asked, 'One of the magazines carried his picture recently.' I replied that Ustinov was on our staff and registered in the Party branch under my charge.

"At this she raised her eyebrows slightly (I wonder if you've noticed this habit of hers) and said very low, and a low voice sounds strange from the lips of a person like her, 'Do you know if Ustinov is married?' I admit this left me nonplussed. 'Is he a relative of yours?' I asked. 'No,' she replied, 'but we're old friends. However, I don't know if he so much as remembers me now.' At this she blushed painfully, to the roots of her hair, and beads of perspiration stood out on the bridge of her nose. I told her that as far as I remembered Ustinov was a widower, but that I could make sure in just a moment. However, she did not wait to hear more and rushed headlong out of the room. What could it mean? I thought that perhaps she was his former wife and got out the form he had filled in to see. But no, the paper said in black and white that he was a widower and the father of three children. I decided to ask Ustinov about Lyubov Chaban

when and if opportunity offered, but somehow it never did. As for Lyubov Chaban, she tackled her new job with such zeal and got things moving so fast, that—I don't want to boast—but little over a month had passed before that nursery of ours had become a model one in the district.

"But those first two weeks when Lyubov Chaban was getting down to her job, she gave us no peace. The Party Bureau met twice to hear her report; the local trade-union group yielded to her urgent demands and organized a committee to take care of the needs of children; she got the wives of our engineers to help her; and as for our supply managers, she kept them in such mortal fear of her, that they ran when they heard her voice. Only they never managed to run very far. The next moment she was down on them like a hawk on its prey and would not let go until she had got everything she wanted out of them.

"There was the time the Minister came to see us. You must have heard how exacting he is where the needs of the builders are concerned. First, he'll go over the construction site and then demand to see how we accommodate our personnel. And there's no getting round him! On this occasion, too, he tried the water from every hydrant and marched off to

the dining-hall kitchen there to try a spoonful out of every cauldron. He went over to the store and gave a piece of his mind to our trade and supply agents because there were no good radio sets or motorcycles on sale that day; and, of course, he paid a visit to the nursery. Once there, we all felt a wave of relief. Everything around us sparkled and shone and the children were plump, with cheeks as round and red as apples. The Minister turned to Lyubov Chaban with a smile and said, 'Thanks. This is fine.' And what do you think she said to that? Why, she fairly snapped at him. 'Aren't you asking too little of us, Comrade Minister?' she said. 'Do you call this fine? Our babies were to have a two-story house according to the plan, and where is this house? I don't see it. We planted this garden and those trees with our own hands, but we still have no fence. Do you think our young mothers went to all that trouble just to give the goats a dainty lunch?' One thing led to another and she just went on and on. 'This is a great construction project,' she said, 'and everything here must be of the best and the finest.' Some of us glanced cautiously at the Minister to see how he was taking it. Well, he was taking it all right. He listened to her with a serious air, and only his eyes laughed.

'You're right,' he said, 'you're right all the way.' You'd think she'd stop at that, but she didn't. 'I know I'm right,' she said. 'Now tell me, will my kids get everything I spoke about?'

" 'They will,' the Minister replied. 'They'll get everything the plan provides for.'

"That was Lyubov Chaban for you. Our women all adored her. We were immensely pleased ourselves. We could hardly have hoped to find a better person to handle our nursery.

"One evening when I had remained in this office alone reading and collecting some data for a report, there was a knock at the door and Lyubov Chaban came in. She apologized for disturbing me so late, and admitted that she had wanted to find me alone. She sat down on this very sofa, the one you and I are sitting on now. She asked me not to misunderstand her and not to take her request as so much nonsense, for she had given the matter serious thought.

" 'What's up?' I asked.

" 'Just this. You must release me from my job and help me to sign up for the courses for concrete workers. I heard that they don't admit women very willingly there.'

"I attempted to dissuade her, but she stood firm.

" 'What's happened?' I asked. 'Has anything gone wrong? Or are you just tired of working with children? Maybe you need a rest. Would you like to go to some resort?'

"She shook her head.

" 'What would go wrong? I love children. I've never learned how to get tired. But you must help me become a concrete worker all the same.' And, quite reasonably, she added that things were running smoothly now at the nursery, the staff was capable and there was no better person to take the job over than the wife of one of the engineers, and she gave the woman's name.

"What could I say to her? It couldn't be denied that she had chosen a suitable successor and she was evidently very much in earnest. 'Very well,' I said, 'the least I can do is to speak on your behalf with the head of the project.'

"She thanked me, but made no move to leave. I asked her if there was anything else.

" 'Yes, there is,' she said. 'It's not right for Yegor Ustinov to still be living in the hostel here when his three children are staying in Kaluga at his old aunt's. He ought to get a flat in one of our new houses. Do you think it's easy for a father to be separated from his children?'

" 'Why didn't he ever mention this himself?'

" 'He's not that kind,' she said. 'He'd do anything for the work, but he'd hesitate to ask for a bit of snow in winter if he wanted it for himself. You ought to have thought of it yourselves and not waited for an application.'

"The following day I had a talk with Yegor and, much to my shame, learnt that Lyubov was right concerning his private affairs. This was the first opportunity I had of asking Yegor about Lyubov, and I made the most of it. Reticent as a rule, he closed up like a clam when I mentioned Lyubov. He kept his eyes fixed on the floor all through our conversation and I fairly had to wrench every word out of him.

" 'Lyubov Chaban is a fine person,' said I.

" 'Not bad,' said he.

" 'Have you known each other long?'

" 'Eight years.'

" 'Come from the same place?'

" 'No. We both recuperated at the same hospital during the war.'

" 'Was there anything between you?'

He smiled wryly.

" 'My wife was living then, and, besides, a hospital is no place for such things. We did have long talks, though, in the manner of soldiers, about life and other things.'

" 'And now?'

" 'Now we exchange the usual hello's and good-bye's. We meet at Party meetings. Look at her. She's one of the most popular persons in this district now.'

" 'She's asking me to send her to the courses for concrete workers. What do you think about it?'

"The question seemed suddenly to rouse him, but only for a moment. The next moment his answer came cool and casual. 'That's your business. She'll make a good concrete worker, I know. She always gets what she's after. She's like that. Is there anything else you want to ask me?'

"It turned out that Yegor Ustinov was right. Before six months were up, Lyubov Chaban had become a concrete worker. And a good one! Everyone here was accustomed to seeing her in a starched smock and white kerchief. And when she appeared for the first time after finishing her courses in a canvas suit, with work gloves and heavy rubber boots, we all found the sight odd. But, as usual, she was a success at her new job. I believe that, outside the education she has had and her natural abilities, what helps her on is her amazing thirst for knowledge, the truly irrepressible desire that she has to study every new development in her line of work. I was

drawing up a report on political training among our Party members once and I looked up their library subscription cards. There seemed to be nothing that Lyubov Chaban hadn't read in that one year!

"Once Lyubov had tackled her job, she went on with confident stride. In a few months she was promoted to team leader, and that's when all her bickerings with Yegor Ustinov began.

"Whenever a meeting was called to discuss production, Lyubov climbed on to the rostrum and picked everyone to pieces, especially Yegor. And she was never one to bandy words that could easily be waved aside or met with superior silence. She talked business! Yegor couldn't just let it pass, and that was where they clashed. He was a good worker and initiator, with years of experience at the Dnieper Hydro-Electric Station. And the team he had knocked together matched his own standard in every way. He was accustomed to having people respect his opinion. It went against his grain to hear Lyubov say as she did:

" 'You've got a lot in you, Yegor Ustinov, but you're not willing to part with it. You're apt to keep a few tricks up your sleeve, to work with a nice fat margin.'

"He went at her with his knowledge that was born of experience; she offset that with a store of scientific fact. She's quite a personality. Started a correspondence on her own initiative with the Institute of Cement and the Leningrad House of Engineering. Gets all the latest information from them.

"At first there was little else she could do but attack Yegor with the newly introduced technology she had learned of, but very soon she pressed him to the wall with her production achievements. There was no one to compare with Yegor Ustinov before, he simply had no equal. His team never achieved less than fifty per cent over the planned quota, and they topped it by a hundred per cent before holidays. Of course, that never failed to get Yegor a general round of applause. And here now was Lyubov and her team gaining upon him, stepping on his heels, threatening to outstrip him before they were through. And that's just what they did. The Challenge Banner is at present with Lyubov's team.

"The Party members among our concrete workers told me that Ustinov was taking the whole thing hard, hated even to hear her name mentioned. And he became more taciturn than ever. Wild horses couldn't drag a word out of him. Things got to a point where Lyubov had

only to come into the room for Yegor to start going out of it. We saw that the quarrel was beginning to go beyond the limits of a purely private affair and called them both to a meeting of the Bureau. One way of making them see reason, and we tried that, was to argue that it was inexcusable for Party members to show so poor an example of personal behaviour to non-Communists. They said nothing. Then we pointed out that the leaders of our two best teams should help each other, should pave the way for the rest. They reddened but still said nothing. All our criticism left them silently staring at the floor. We then demanded that they explain to the Bureau what their quarrel was all about; surely it could not be on account of a trifle; that was the privilege of Gogol's two famous characters who let a worthless gun turn them into mortal enemies. This brought a smile to Ustinov's lips.

" 'Let her tell you. There's no one so clever. She's always telling everybody what to do.'

"And Lyubov never looked at him as she said, 'No, let him. He's got a store of experience so big that it blinds him to everything new.'

"And they went into another argument. They had really earned Party reprimands, both of them, by such an attitude.

"I must confess that we didn't get very far with them that day. That is, formally it all came out right, Lyubov and Yegor promising to straighten out their business relationship and Yegor saying that he would in the future react to criticism as a Communist should. That part of it left nothing to be desired. But I felt that essentially nothing had been settled, that the reason for their dispute had not been established and was, therefore, not eliminated. I found an excuse to detain Ustinov for a few moments, and we left the Bureau office together, for, since he had moved to his new flat, we had virtually become neighbours. I had thought that alone with him I would manage to get him to talk. Vain hope! He rolled up as tight as a hedgehog with all the prickles sticking out and spoke through set teeth, letting out one word at a time.

" 'Perhaps you have offended each other in some way?'

" 'No.'

" 'Or perhaps, there's some old grudge at the back of this?'

" 'No.'

" 'Perhaps it's jealousy, damn it all?'

"He made no answer, only clenched his teeth the tighter. I could see the muscles of his face working. That made one think that per-

haps he had fallen hopelessly in love with Lyubov Chaban. The supposition was rather odd under the circumstances, but, of course, life has its surprises. I began to tell him, as though by chance, how Lyubov Chaban, when she had first arrived here, had inquired about him, and what solicitude she had shown in insisting on a home for him and his children. He took in my words silently and without seeming to pay much attention. But I had a feeling that there was something tense and strained about him. He stopped suddenly.

"'Why all that propaganda? I've known what sort of person she is ever since I first laid eyes on her. There may not be another one like her in all the world, only——' He waved his hand angrily and, without so much as saying good-bye, turned off down the first side street we came to.

"I remember very clearly that I had this talk with Ustinov on Thursday, and the following Monday, as I was making the round of the building grounds, a man, all out of breath, caught up with me, shouting:

"'There's trouble at the dam! The reinforcement block has slipped the hook and Yegor Ustinov's been hurt.'

"The dam was only a short distance away, and I was soon at the scene of the accident.

"Yegor was lying on a sheet of canvas. There was no blood anywhere. His eyes were closed and he was very pale and still. The doctor and nurse were busy at his side and, as always happens in such cases, a crowd had collected round him. The silence was so profound that one could hear Yegor's heavy, raucous breathing.

"Suddenly a scream, a woman's heart-rending scream, broke through the quiet, sending shivers running down our spines. A woman, dishevelled, sobbing, pushed her way to where Yegor was lying and dropped down like one felled beside him.

" 'Yegor, love, what is it? Look at me, sweet, please look at me.' And she wept as though her heart would break. At this Ustinov opened his eyes and looked at the woman in astonishment, as though unable to trust his own sight and trying to determine whether this was real or just one of the fancies of his delirium. Suddenly, and this was what struck me with particular clarity, I saw in the eyes of this man, badly injured and with consciousness barely regained, a light of such pure happiness that I felt myself to be an indiscreet intruder for having noticed it. Then the woman put her arms round Yegor, and pressed him to her, stroking his hair and

whispering, 'You're alive, my own, you're alive, my love, I've had you in my heart for so many years.' And the tears kept streaming from her eyes and falling on his face.

"Here, to my surprise, it dawned on me that this bare-headed, dishevelled woman with the wet, tear-stained face was no other than Lyubov Chaban. Yes, it was she. I could hardly believe it. I felt embarrassed, as though I had unwittingly stumbled on a stranger's secret. The rest of the people there must have sensed it, too, for they turned away and began to move off. The doctor concentrated on putting his instruments away into his bag. I asked him what he thought of Yegor's condition.

" 'He'll be all right. No bones broken. He's lucky to get off so lightly.' Then, turning to Lyubov, 'Young woman, I think you'd better leave him alone. He needs rest and quiet. You'll do your embracing at home.'

"At the word 'home' Lyubov Chaban suddenly straightened up and jumped to her feet, pushing back her tousled hair under her kerchief with a swift movement. Her face fell back into its usual stern lines as though it were not she at all who had just wept with such truly feminine abandon. Yegor moaned. Lyubov looked at him quickly, her glance softened and I knew that never again would that

never smile leave her lips nor that caressing light go out of her black eyes.

"It was this accident that helped Lyubov and Yegor realize how they felt about each other.

"Who knows what would have happened if it hadn't been for that? Their own fierce pride and the short-sightedness of those about them might very well have led to their drifting apart without so much as a word.

"Confess now, isn't the story a curious one? It is, of course. And it also teaches people like me, who are engaged in Party work, a lesson. We must learn to understand people and to help them in time.

"As for the two I told you about, there remains to add that they got married and that she became an exemplary mother to his children. But they still argue themselves hoarse at production meetings. Only now Yegor is beginning to learn to admit his mistakes. She took his name when they registered, and she's been Lyubov Ustinova in her passport for half a year now. But we all of us, including her husband, still call her Lyubov Chaban.

"And that's the whole story. You can publish it if you think it's worth it."

STEEPLE-JACK

From the very day of the arrival of the Network Builders brigade in these now well-known parts, Pyotr Sinitsyn suddenly became disappointed in his trade.

No, disappointed is not the word. His feelings were far more complicated.

A steeple-jack mechanic, Pyotr loved his work as much as ever, difficult and perilous though it was. From afar, the towers of the high-voltage wiring seem light and gossamery and as though soaring in the air above the boundless steppes or marching diligently in single file through the forests. Actually, they are heavy structures of steel. To lift, mount and secure them on their concrete saddles and then, suspended high in the air, join on to them the wires and lightning cables, is no easy job. It demands skill, agility, quick wits and strong nerves, for a reasonable element of risk is by no means excluded.

Pyotr Sinitsyn, who began in an assembly brigade, was interested in the work from the start, soon grew accustomed to it and was so carried away as to consider it the most engrossing and thrilling in the world. Besides, it was undeniably pleasant to realize that you were bringing light, power, culture to regions remote and deserted, to the steppe and the forest.

This time the steel towers were on the march along the route of a great construction project. On fair days one had from their summits a bird's-eye view of the neighbourhood for over fifteen miles around. Before Pyotr's wondering gaze there unfolded one after another scenes of construction, something he had never seen before. The work was carried on on a grand scale. In the clouds of dust enveloping the torn and mutilated face of the steppe, the youthful mechanic discerned an array of huge and intricate machines. From where he was perched, the machines looked like so many living beings, and the tiny people ensconced in their cabs and operating them so competently—the brain of these giants. The sight was so spectacular that he would sometimes drop work and freeze to the spot while he surveyed the ground below in spellbound silence. Among those employed in con-

struction there were many people of his own age, ordinary boys and girls. With growing dissatisfaction he felt that he was envying them the confidence they displayed in lording it over this whole mass of machinery and operating mechanisms compared with which his own tool seemed to him as simple as a stone axe. The progress of the construction project, which saw the rise of new structures above the broken and lacerated earth, was daily recorded in the papers. The whole country watched the work of these boys and girls, and he, Pyotr Sinitsyn, and his comrades continued to mount the same old towers and to string up endless wires, whose form never varied in the forest, steppe or on the routes of construction projects.

It was then that Pyotr's attitude toward his trade underwent a change. Seeing that this was beginning to tell on his work, he confided his anxiety to foreman Zakharov who had been the one to put him on to this difficult trade. Zakharov, or, as everyone called him, Zakharych, a mild-tempered man, criticized by his chiefs for being over-complaisant and familiar with his subordinates, looked at his pupil perplexed, then, reddening till the sweat stood out in drops on his face, let out such a stream of abuse of the old pre-revolutionary calibre

Petya sprang away from him and hastened to go without waiting for any more enlightening reply to his question.

But that evening when he had checked the brigade's work, the foreman himself sought out Petya and, taking hold of his arm with one small hard hand, looked into the youth's flushed face and said reproachfully:

"Look, Petya, your work is something you can't trifle with. It's like a wife; once you've chosen her, you must love her and not let your gaze wander elsewhere; it's very little you are worth if you do. You don't want them to call you a weathercock, do you?"

At that time the mechanics were quartered in a house on the outskirts of the town. Six of them occupied one large room, the foreman sleeping with them in a corner screened off from the rest of the room by a blanket. That night, when everyone was in bed and snoring away in many different keys, Pyotr could not get to sleep and kept turning restlessly from side to side. Several times he had started to count to a hundred and back, but sleep evaded him. The conversation he had had with the foreman kept recurring to him again and again.

Suddenly he heard the creak of the wooden bed in the corner and the hesitant steps of

someone who, careful not to disturb the sleepers, was groping his way to his side.

"Wide awake, aren't you?" came the whispered words, and Pyotr recognized Zakharych. "I can't get to sleep, either. My sides ache from all the tossing I did. You cut me to the heart today, Petya. If it were me you were criticizing, I wouldn't mind. But it's our trade you were disloyal to, and one's trade is a sacred thing. A chap must believe in what he does."

Pyotr was silent. He was astounded at the sudden loquacity of a man who usually kept his thoughts to himself.

"Machines, you say. Well, they're fine machines, and I won't deny it. I like the look of them myself. But machines are nothing without the men who run them. Put a fool at the wheel, and he'll make a mess of things. But a man with brains will work wonders with a simple pair of wire-cutters. Now you say you doubt the worth of what you're doing and feel you want to join the builders. Well, a construction project's all very well, but if we don't mast the towers and supports in time on the Volga, if we don't string the line across, the whole undertaking will come to a standstill: the machines will have no feed and they'll be stalled."

The foreman bent over the young man's ear and confided to him in a hot whisper that he had recently been present at a conference where plans for work of paramount importance, and on a scale never before essayed, were mapped out. A stretch of wire a mile long was to be run between two shore supports at a height of over three hundred feet. It was an urgent task, one to be completed before the river rose. To fail to finish it in time would mean that the river's left bank would remain without its current supply.

"How's that for a bit of news, lad? I suppose you'll know now just how important you are," the foreman said. "Remember, laddie, it matters little where you work so long as you love your work and do it well; a good pair of hands and a warm heart is what you need, and some brains thrown in for good measure. If you have all that, even if you're a simple ferryman, your hour to make yourself heard will come and the people will thank you for what you do."

Pyotr recalled this nocturnal talk and the foreman's whispered words some weeks later when the giant, fragile-looking towers, straining up into the blue, rose above the river-banks. The wires connecting the towers sagged slightly; though thick, they were barely visible

from the ground. A problem unprecedented in the history of engineering was solved, solved cleverly and promptly, with consummate skill.

Then, just one day before the current was to be switched on, the inspectors sighted a break in the wire conductor on one of the phases just above the middle of the river.

It was a staggering discovery. Navigation had already started, and the wire could not be lowered. To delay exploitation of the line was out of the question: the numerous machines employed, the suction dredges and excavators, were ready for operation and waiting for their supply of current. There remained only one way out: to find a man versed in the work, who would be valiant enough to mount a line hanging three hundred feet above the river's level, reach the place of the break, and there, swaying above the abyss, bind up the wire. Not one of the men on the assembly brigade had ever been faced with such a task. For that matter, hardly was there anyone in the world who had ever done anything approaching this.

Just as back at the front volunteers were called upon to perform some dangerous and heroic deed, so now the engineer in charge got

together the best of his men and asked if any one of them was willing to undertake this difficult and perilous assignment.

A silence ensued. The mechanics, shielding their eyes from the sun with their hands, looked at the dipping wire as it see-sawed over the rapids, hoping to discern the fatal break. The prismatic field-glasses passed from hand to hand. Their powerful lenses enabled them to see even the coils of the disjointed conductor. The men stood in onerous silence, weighing in their minds their own powers of endurance and the distance one had to crawl on the wire high over the abyss. Each mentally made this dangerous journey and each felt his pulse quicken and his breath come short at the thought.

Pyotr was among the men present, and, when the engineer asked for a volunteer, he remembered Zakharych and what he had said that night about there coming a moment for every man, whatever his line of work, to show what he amounted to. Pyotr thought, too, of the huge construction project, the sight of which had so impressed him; it was quite possible that it would now remain without electricity. These thoughts flashed through his head and, even before a final decision, the result of serious deliberation, had ripened

within him, he stepped forward and said hastily: "I'm your man."

Then, glancing jealously at the rest of the men, he added, as though they were disputing his right to heroic effort:

"I'll do it. I'll fix the break."

His heart beat so violently that, alarmed lest the engineer on whose word his fate now rested, hear it, he edged away from him. Other men volunteered after Pyotr. The engineer scrutinized their tanned faces. They all had peeling noses and hair bleached by the sun and their foreheads where they had been sheltered by their cap-peaks looked white and strange. He had to make a decision on which depended not only the timely feeding of the construction project with electricity, but, perhaps, even the life of a human being. His gaze lingered on the young face, transformed by emotion, a flush of excitement showing through the deep tan.

"I'll take Sinitsyn," the engineer said in as calm a tone as he could muster, and he gave instructions for all measures of precaution to be seen to immediately.

It is the general belief that steeple-jacks are devoid of a sense of height, a universal sense born and implanted in man when he, an infant, makes his first steps on the ground.

Such a conviction is unfounded, for fear of height is a feeling common to all steeple-jacks however experienced, the all-conquering human will being the only power capable of staying it and allowing man to toil away somewhere up on the steeple of a multi-story building with the same studied skill as on solid ground. The steeple-jack who knows the meaning of height through personal experience and has learned to stay cool however high up he is, cannot watch his comrade working overhead without excitement.

And now, when Pyotr with his bag of tools on his back was climbing nimbly up the steel tower to its peak, his comrades were weighed down with a feeling of nervousness as they followed his ascent with their eyes. Pyotr became smaller and smaller. They could no longer see his face with the lower lip caught between his teeth. His form, a dark silhouette, dived in and out the mass of dirty spring clouds that rushed across the sky and seemed from below to be ripped apart as they collided with the steel body of the tower.

"There's a wind up too, damn it!" one of the men observed. "And it's damp. The wire must be slippery," another added.

"Keep still, you," Zakharych breathed without taking his eyes off Pyotr's tiny figure, as

though the whispered remarks of the men on the ground could divert and distract his attention. He had now torn himself away from the tower's steel trusses and had begun his slow, his painfully slow journey along the swinging wire.

"There he goes! Look at that wire dance!" someone said.

"Stop your croaking," Zakharych growled, mumbling beneath his breath. "Go slow, go slow. Tighten your hold and rest!"

Meanwhile, the life of the big river went on as before. A small, brisk tug pulled barges loaded with timber. A launch dragged along a huge wooden raft, its deck packed with men and machines. A large snow-white steamer breasted the waves as imperiously as a swan. The man, crawling snail-like along the wind-tossed wire in the dizzy heights overhead, was no more than a tiny speck to those who watched him from below. But he was seen by all, and the gazes of hundreds of people were fixed on him.

Zakharych, who had himself repaired wires in just such a way, though at a lesser height and under far less incredible circumstances, could not overcome the feeling that the gazes of the onlookers, the chugging of the launch motor and the hoots of the ships were some-

now handicapping one who, hanging over the gulf, was slowly but stubbornly advancing toward the place of the rupture.

"Petya, laddie, watch your step, do watch your step," whispered Zakharych, and, when one of the men had held the field-glasses up to his eyes, pulled them out of the man's hands with the words, "Don't! This is no circus-ring!"

The engineer who had picked Pyotr out of the group of volunteers caught the foreman's last words. "The circus!" he thought. "How can the most intricate of circus stunts, repeated for the hundredth time at a limited height and over a net, be compared with what that boy has just volunteered to do? To be dangling over a chasm three hundred and eighty feet above the level of the water!" The engineer's brain, trained in mathematics, went on with the calculations automatically: the speed of the drop in the first, second, third second.... Good God, it was terrific! But the launch must be sent there, under the wires, anyway, just in case.... As though in such a case any help were possible! You struck the water and——

"Prepare the launch!" the engineer commanded.

Its motor roaring, the launch tore violently away from the moorage and, as though tied, began to circle over the river under the wire. Beside the engineer and Zakharych, only the helmsman was on board, a shock-headed boy in a sailor's flesh shirt; he had grown so pale that the coat of tan on his face seemed green and his freckles black.

Zakharych, afraid to lose sight of his pupil, lay down on the stern.

"Stop that noise, you devil!" he hissed at the helmsman. "You aren't out motoring with your mother-in-law. Switch to low gear."

Body, soul, brain and eyes, the foreman was with Pyotr, who, advancing steadily along the wire, had now nearly gained the middle of the river. Zakharych's most ardent desire was to be up there beside his pupil, and only the knowledge, born of years of practice, that where one was enough, a second was a hindrance and his self-discipline prevented his asking permission of the engineer to go to Pyotr's assistance.

In the meantime Pyotr had arrived at the place of the break.

At first, when he had climbed up on the peak of the tower that moaned and shook perceptibly under the onslaught of the wind, and there before him stretched wires and cables

which seemed to be swimming to and fro, he was filled with a fear that set his knees trembling. Scaling heights was something Pyotr was long accustomed to. He had learned to stifle that oppressive sense of dread that overcomes a man when he stands on the brink of a precipice. Pyotr never looked down unless it was necessary and had taught himself to accept all that surrounded him whenever he did steeple work as though he were at ground level.

But here there was no firm support for either his legs or his arms. The cable along which he was to move rocked ominously as though striving to slip from under him. His blood ran cold, and the fear that was born somewhere just under his heart bound his limbs. His arms and legs lost their elasticity and his movements became awkward and clumsy. For the first time in his life Pyotr felt himself tense, as every nerve of his body strained to the trembling and swaying of the tower peak. What was he to do, climb down? Wanting to measure the distance that separated him from the ground, he looked down with uneasy gaze. The construction site spread out before him. He had an excellent view of it. Cloaked in the smoke of many chimneys, shrouded in clouds of dust, it sprawled just inside the river bend. The suction dredges as they

rode at anchor resembled floating houses. Behind them, looking like huge sausages, stretched the pulp pipes. Moored vessels crowded at the jetty. The tireless cranes ceaselessly swept loads off the barges: shaped iron, steel trusses, piles of planks and logs, nets full of sacks, then again metal and again logs....

Work was in full swing all over the construction site, as far as the horizon.

Was Pyotr to give up? To leave all these dredges, these walking excavators and concrete plants without electricity? Hundreds of eyes were following Pyotr's movements at that moment, looking at him from the banks, the ships, the rafts.

Climb down? How dare he think that? Forward, only forward!

With a grasping, springy movement, Pyotr slid on to the wire and, feeling new vigour flow into his veins and his hands regain their grip, moved forward elated, for that was the emotion uppermost in his heart just then. All his doubts, misgivings and waverings he left behind him. His thought, will and energy were all concentrated on one inflexible resolve: to reach the place of the break and repair it. As he worked his way along the bobbing wire, Pyotr thought only about how to

make his movements more accurate; he saw nothing but his shaky support, now muffled in grey fog, now clearly outlined against the sky. Everything in him was merged in one desire, one determination: not to slip, to keep his balance, to get to the break and fix it. He looked down no longer, thought no more of the danger that threatened him. His every step was calculated; he moved slowly and with assurance, working his way inch by inch where even a cat would not have ventured.

Oddly enough, to his own surprise, he was there before he knew it. Here it was, the blasted break. The wire of the second phase, the coils of the broken conductor.... Why, in the name of Heaven, did it have to come apart here, above the river?

Perhaps they had overlooked something and had run up an imperfect wire. No, the little golden wire-ends at the place of the break showed that the conductor had split recently, after it had been hung. But this made no difference one way or the other—the break must be fixed and fixed fast!

Pyotr swayed slowly over the chasm. The job he was intent on absorbed all his attention, all his senses. His hands were sure and steady as they fixed the torn wire. It was trifling work in itself, but try and do it here,

perched on a wire that was in continuous movement. And then the wind, the treacherous wind that died down and went into hiding one moment only to pounce upon you again with renewed force the next, to catch you unawares and push you down.

"Don't try any tricks, brother wind, it won't work!" Pyotr let out through his teeth, while his hands went on with their job quickly and obediently.

He was soon done and free to go back. Then something happened which changed everything. His pliers slipped out of Pyotr's hand.

Slowly, as it seemed to Pyotr, they turned over in the air and sank down. The eyes of the mechanic involuntarily followed the tool's descent to the second when, cleaving the river's surface, it disappeared under the water.

For the first time since Pyotr had left behind him the tower's steel bracings, he had a clear view of the yellowish, turbulent river below with white caps sweeping across it. Gulls were spinning close to the water, and a launch on which Pyotr could make out the engineer and the foreman, circled round and round.

Pyotr had a glimpse of Zakharych, his hands cupped in the form of a mouthpiece; he seemed to be shouting something.

The wires and cables at Pyotr's side rocked and droned. Watching them, Pyotr could feel again, as he had a while before on the tower, his body's physical reaction to the terrific height, the instability of the undulating wire and the fierce strength of the wind. A clammy sweat broke out all over him. He felt dizzy. Now that his confidence was gone, his hands trembled sickeningly as they clutched the wire. His head swam.

Pyotr lost his balance. With a convulsive jerk of his hand, he toppled down uncontrollably from his shaky perch and started falling into the yellow, shifting chasm below.

"A-a-a-ah!"

This unintelligible cry burst simultaneously from the lips of Zakharych who was lying on the stern of the launch, his gaze riveted on the wires above, the engineer, Pyotr's fellow workers who were watching their comrade from the bank, and the numerous passengers aboard a ferry-boat on its return voyage from the construction site—it burst from the lips of all who saw Pyotr Sinitsyn at the moment of his fall.

Pyotr had slipped from the wire. But the next moment he was seen hanging on the chain of his working belt, which was attached to the wire. The mechanics rushed to the tower and started climbing it. The launch contin-

ued to circle on the river below the spot, where, at a height of three hundred feet, a man hung helplessly, his body lashed by the wind. In his agitation the engineer had bitten through his lip, and a little stream of blood trickled slowly down his chin. The foreman, framing his hands trumpet-wise again, shouted with all the strength of his lungs:

"Petya! Petya! Don't wriggle! Relax! Relax and take it easy! Save your strength! You hear? Save your strength!"

For a second the foreman's hands hung down limply. There was confusion in his eyes and his tone was anguished as he addressed the engineer.

"He can't hear me. It's the breakers." Then, turning to the helmsman with the words "Hush that contraption of yours! It's rattling something terrible!" he raised his hands to his mouth and shouted till he was hoarse.

His whole body trembled from the strain and red circles swam in front of his eyes.

"Petya! Hang on there, Petya! When you're good and ready, swing yourself up and hitch your legs over the wire. Petya!" Then, turning to the engineer, in a wheeze:

"He's heard me."

But Pyotr heard not a word. Recovering from the fright of the fall and getting back his

breath, he realized that the chain and belt he had often neglected to wear had saved his life. He knew now that he would not fall down into the river. This enabled him to think over his chances.

It wasn't possible that there was no way out! He couldn't just stay there hanging over the river on a chain no matter how strong! After all, he had done what he had set out to do, he had made the ascent and connected the wire. All obstacles were now removed, and the construction site would have its current supply.

The consciousness of duty well fulfilled revived him entirely and gave his thoughts clarity. But what was he to do? If he continued to hang here, they would unquestionably start lowering the wire. It was a titanic undertaking. Already they were mounting the tower! What's more, they would be unable to string up the wire again very soon. What was to be done then? What was to be done?

He did not hear what Zakharych was shouting to him from the launch. But though the wind carried away the foreman's words, the training he had given his pupil now came to Pyotr's help. For Pyotr hit on a way out of the difficulty without outside assistance.

For several trying minutes he hung very quietly, resting, if one can speak of a man in his position as resting. He was saving his strength. After a while he began to rock himself on the chain, swinging harder and harder all the time. His leg touched the wire. Another try, and another! Ah, how dizzy he was! Once more.... The wire loomed dimly beside him. Pyotr tensed, rolled himself into a ball, then, at a bound, let himself go and swung his crossed legs over the wire.

He was no longer the toy of the wind. He could control his movements at will. This was a gain. He rested a few more minutes, hanging in the air head down. He was no longer afraid. He was sure of himself. Hoisting himself up little by little on the chain, he reached the wire. A jerk, and he was back on top of it again.

No, he did not hear the jubilant cries that rang over the river. He was oblivious to all sights and sounds. He was resting, collecting his strength. After a few moments he braced himself and, bearing himself along on his hands, made his way back to the steel tower.

Those who observed him from the ground with bated breath were amazed at the swiftness with which he covered this distance. Pyotr, on the contrary, found his progress

unbearably slow and registered his every step as an achievement and victory.

He was worn out, and at moments moved mechanically, out of pure instinct. But he never stopped. His will-power and his faith in himself which had just stood a superhuman test, led him unerringly on. His hand touched the metal truss of the tower. At last! All his emotions, deadened by fatigue, now flamed out anew. He was suffocated with joy. It was as though his heart had grown too big for his breast. It wasn't simply the joy of being alive and safe. No, it was an immeasurably greater joy.

"I've done my bit, too," thought Pyotr as he climbed slowly down from the tower. But, when he was back on the ground and surrounded by his overjoyed friends, the beaming engineer and Zakharych who no longer regarded Pyotr with condescension but with deference and respect, when all of them began to vie with one another in praising and congratulating him, Pyotr kept his radiant thoughts to himself. In a voice hoarse with fatigue he said:

"Could I have a glass of water, please? A glass of cold water would be fine!"

FOG

Spring arrived with the suddenness of a cloud-burst.

We had had several weeks of heavy snowfalls and blizzards. The snow had patched up all the bald spots, and the steppe round the building sites was very smooth, clean and white and, blending as it did with the white, gelid sky, seemed to stretch on without end. It was as though the horizon had vanished. The north winds, sweeping dry, rustling pellets of snow over the snow-drifts, polished them to a sheen, and in the rare moments when the sun broke through the whitish haze that lay over all, the snow sparkled brilliantly in its yellow, warmthless rays.

It was very cold. The concrete, in the brief span of its journey from the plant, froze in the dumpers. The electric welders, joining reinforcement blocks, were careful not to remove their work gloves, for fear of having the skin stripped off their palms. The least incau-

: ::, and one's hand stuck to the metal. Drivers of lorries carrying loads of building materials over the steppe, were issued fur jackets and warm flap-eared hats. All over the construction site, camp-fires built on sheets of iron burned day and night.

But, one morning, stepping out of their houses to go to work, the people saw no grand panorama of the construction project spread before them that had for so long held their admiring gaze. Nothing was visible: not the streets of the new town, nor even the front porches of the houses. Everything around them was cloaked in hoary fog, so dense and thick that one could not see two steps ahead. It was warm, even stifling. The road, which the day before had been as hard as stone and had rung under one's feet, was now a melting mass of damp, granular snow. The workers from among the local inhabitants said that the fog was a "snow-eater" and that its coming meant that an early spring had set in.

And so it was. The landscape changed as quickly as the scenery on the stage: the snows turned grey, and the moisture-saturated earth, black and oily, began to show here and there from underneath. The roads swelled out, invading the steppe, and where the day before caravans of cars had zipped briskly along as

though speeding over a highway, now only powerful tractors pulled urgent loads, snorting angrily as they churned the mud with their untiring tracks. Except for tractors and cross-country vehicles nothing else on wheels could make headway along the steppe roads, above which there rose a pearly, quivering haze and all day long the larks trilled delicately and tenderly.

It was along such a road that my friend and I set off for a distant building outfit which was the first on the site to be stormed by the spring freshets, a final test of endurance. The black earth beneath our feet had grown soft and viscous with wet and felt like a quagmire.

The rubber boots we wore were soon caked with mud and as heavy as the boots of divers. Our clothes were soaked with perspiration and clung to our bodies, making movement difficult.

By evening the fog thickened. The sun was caught in its web before reaching the horizon. Night was upon us so quickly that we had no time to determine with any exactness how far we had yet to go. We were closed in on all sides by a damp darkness. The slush underfoot gave out a champing sound. Here and there a creek gurgled softly and the thawing

snow sank down with a sigh. Only the humming wires, muffled by the fog, were an invisible landmark guiding us on our way.

It is easy to imagine the sudden joy we felt at catching the sound of voices coming from just ahead. The voices were barely audible, and at moments it seemed that we had fancied them. We quickened our steps, and with the abruptness with which one comes upon things in a fog, soon gained on the speakers, whom we now knew to be two women. They were going in the same direction as we were, but they moved with such confidence and conversed so calmly that one could see that they were accustomed to the steppe road, the slush and the fog. It was evident that they had been talking for some time.

"You don't mean he came right out and said that to you?" one of the women asked. Her voice was young and high and the surprise and sympathy in it mingled with indignation.

"Yes, he did," the other returned in a deep-throated contralto, and though she spoke in Russian there was a Ukrainian lilt in her manner of bringing out her words. "He said, 'Olga, go away. I don't want you around here.' My heart sank at the words. 'Just what do you mean?' I said. 'Do you mean you want

someone else around? Someone like that pop-eyed welder Nadya or that red-haired engineer that struts around in slacks?' Zhenya, you should have heard him laugh! 'I've put up with you for close to fifteen years now, Olga,' says he, 'and why would I do that without good reason? You outshine the sun in my eyes, Olga, to say nothing of other women!' Did you ever hear the like, Zhenya? Him thinking all that up, the long-legged devil! 'And now,' says he, 'go away all the same. You're distracting me from my work just when I've got every nerve strained to see how our structures'll stand up to the flood waters.' I'm distracting him! How do you like that? I left the kids alone all day just to come to see him, I walked ten miles, wading through this mud, and that was all the thanks I got. Wouldn't it have hurt your feelings, Zhenya?"

"They're all the same, Olga, all of them, I assure you!" the woman called Zhenya repeated. "Every last one of them. Do you know where I came from to join my husband here? From Siberia. That's about two thousand and a half miles away. I had a good job and was studying besides. My father is one of the best-known people at the plant there. We own a house and I had a large, light room to myself. Mother did the housekeeping, and all I had

to do was attend to my job and my books. And, like the fool that I am, I ditched everything, quarrelled with my father and caught the first train here."

"They say you weren't even married then."

"We weren't. There was nothing much between us back home. We were friends, to be sure, we went to evening trade school together and he used to see me home afterwards, and, oh, we took in a show occasionally, things like that, but that was all. I never even let him kiss me. He's awfully bashful, you know. It's only on his job that he's the legendary hero Ilya Muromets! When he said he was leaving I was so angry with him, I didn't even go to the station to see him off. Imagine, him exchanging me for some kind of construction project! But when his first letter came, in which he told us how he was getting down to his new job and how he was living in a tent and the mosquitoes were eating him alive, I knew nothing could stop me from joining him. Father was displeased and said so, mother wept and I couldn't keep the tears back, either, nearly cried my eyes out. But as for changing my mind, no! I said I would go and that was the end! Somehow he had become much dearer to me since he left. The first months here, we lived in one of those

family tents. The mosquitoes were a menace. I couldn't open my eyes in the morning, they were that swollen from the bites. But did that make him think the more of me? Oh, no!"

"My husband's no different. They're two of a pair," Olga put in.

"All men are the same, Olga," Zhenya declared in a tone of great worldly wisdom. "Take any one of them. What galls me is that my husband can be very vain of his excavator, he's got the latest model and is terribly proud of it, but that he has a young wife beside him just doesn't seem to matter, it's as though I weren't there at all. Sometimes I want to cry. And I do cry, I do! Do you remember that time we had the Maly Theatre company here from Moscow on a tour? I had a new dress made just before. Perhaps you've seen it, it's silk crêpe, deep red with one of those capes draped round the shoulders. It's very becoming, and I was dying to wear it. My husband was pleased, too. Though he's always speaking of his work, he loves the theatre. Back home, we never missed a show if we could help it. So now he put on his best grey suit, the one he'd gone to Moscow in to take part in the Peace Conference, and he polished his shoes till they shone like mirrors. I stuck a batiste hankie in his coat pocket for a finishing touch, and didn't

he look fine! We left the house in high spirits, and who should we come across on the way but the man who operates my husband's excavator on the next shift. He was whipping along on a dumper, and he was covered with mud from head to foot. 'What's your hurry?' my husband asks. 'I must find the mechanic,' the other says. 'We're in trouble. We've had a breakage, and the machine's been stalled for over an hour now.' At that my husband boards the dumper at a jump, new suit, white hanky and all, and knocks against the cab side with his fist. 'We're going back! Step on it!' he shouts. And all this while I was standing there on the sidewalk like a fool. He had forgotten all about me. It was when they had driven off a distance that he remembered and yelled: 'Go on to the club, I'll join you later!' So there I was. I had to sit there beside his vacant seat all through the first half of the concert, and did I burn! Olga darling, just think! Me in my new dress to be sitting there all alone. Well, thought I, just you come here and I'll show you! I spent the intermission in the foyer with Kapustin, an engineer from the hydromechanics department, maybe you know him. He's tall and fair and rather nice."

"And a bachelor, I believe."

"Oh, I don't care about that. It really means nothing to me. I walked about with him just to spite my husband, held his arm, too, and laughed with him and even let him take me to the refreshment room and treat me to a cup of tea and a cake, all out of spite. But we women are funny. It makes me want to slap myself to think of it, but all the time I was walking around with this man and smiling, there was a lump in my throat and I kept thinking about that other one, about my husband. Well, we went back to our seats and everyone sat there enjoying the performance while I kept gulping back my tears and not seeing anything that went on on the stage. I was about to go without waiting for the end of the concert, when there was my husband, if you please, slipping into the seat beside me. You'd think he'd at least say how sorry he was and ask me to forgive him. But no! The first words he said were 'We fixed it.' And was he a sight! Mud all over him, whole cakes of it on his shoes, tired and sweaty. When I whispered to him to at least wipe his face, he took out the hanky I had given him. You should have seen it! It was blacker than a boot rag."

"Tsk-tsk-tsk! I suppose you gave it to him then, didn't you?"

"No, I didn't. That's just it. I'm ashamed

:: admit it, but, far from being angry with him, I was glad to see him. Wasn't it awful of me? But I did promise myself to leave him if he tried anything like that again! I'm afraid I have no backbone, Olga."

"We none of us have, if you ask me," her companion returned. "But I'm going to take my husband down a peg or two just the same. The nerve of him. Telling me I was keeping him from his work. Once the spring flood ebbs off, they'll have a regular bus service again, and he'll come home. That's when I'll have a talk with him." Then, in a half-whisper: "There's someone following us, Zhenya, hear them? And they don't fall back or move ahead."

This last was obviously said about us, and well it might be. It was, perhaps, not quite the pink of courtesy to listen in on strangers' conversation uninvited. But, then, it is rare indeed that a writer is lucky enough to look into the human heart unnoticed. Hoping that the two women would resume their conversation, and, that artless and unaffected, it would flow forth again, with the same old spontaneity, we slowed our step.

"They don't seem to want to come near us! Maybe they're a bad sort," said Zhenya in a frightened whisper.

"'A bad sort'! Would a bad sort be out in the steppe in this slime and fog? No, those people behind us must have some such urgent business on hand as ours," the woman named Olga responded.

Then, much louder and obviously addressing us, she said:

"Hey, Comrades, what makes you drag behind us like that? Come up closer and keep us company."

The fog had played us a trick again. The two women turned out to be so near to us that we almost bumped into their dim figures which seemed to have emerged all at once out of the dense and opaline dark. They wore padded jackets and high rubber boots and were so bundled up in their woollen shawls as to permit us to see very little of their faces. They both were carrying something in their hands.

We learned that they were bound for the same building outfit as ourselves and were familiar with the road: according to them, we had covered most of the way and would soon be there. With the mounting cold of night, the mud beneath our feet was crusted with ice and as though dried and the fog was beginning to lift, gradually growing fibrous and transparent. The moon peeped out, the frost-glazed

puddles in the ruts of the road sparkled all round us, and we now had a chance to take a good look at our travelling companions.

Olga, a tall woman in her late thirties, had a stern, finely chiselled face with a large, resolute mouth. Of tiny Zhenya little else but her pert, up-turned nose was visible. Her eyes shone beneath the shawl that was pulled low over her forehead. A light, fluffy lock of hair had escaped from under it, and, her hands being taken, she vainly tried to imprison it again by rubbing her cheek against her shoulder.

No sooner had we joined the two, however, than as usual the expected happened, much to our disappointment. When they learned who we were and why we were in such a hurry, a sudden change came over our companions. The lovely guilelessness that had been theirs a minute before, disappeared at once, and they began to vie with each other in telling us about the construction project where their husbands were employed. They spoke proudly and eagerly, but, alas, in smooth and stilted tones. Of their husbands, of whom one was a celebrated excavator operator and the other a no less celebrated concrete-worker and brigade-leader, they said only that they were of the advance-guard of builders and gave us their output figures for the month.

Lights were already beginning to glimmer in the distance, breaking through the fog which had now lifted almost entirely and was hugging the earth, when my friend ventured to ask the two women what it was that made them go to the construction site at night and with the road flooded. At this their speech regained its old simple charm.

"But the flood! Our men haven't been home for a week," Zhenya replied. "Rush work, you know."

"Besides, they simply haven't the time to make the journey there and back. It would take all of six hours. No car can make this slush," Olga added. "We're taking their dinner to them. I made my husband some Ukrainian *borshch*. We're from Poltava, and *borshch* is a favourite dish there. My husband's awfully fond of it. And Zhenya here, her man being a Siberian, has got up some *pelmeni* for him and a few other good things besides."

"Haven't they a canteen out there they could go to?"

The women glanced at each other and then looked at us, the first, in bewilderment, and the second, with a condescending smile.

"They not only have a canteen, they have a restaurant, and the head cook there is al-

-ays boasting that he fed a Marshal during the war. You need a dictionary to read their menus," Zhenya explained, not without a certain resentment, for she had apparently found the question to contain what was to her an unpardonable and even offensive lack of information.

"They've got everything there, Comrades, but is that fancy food of theirs, those croquettes à la something or other, to compare with good, honest home-made stuff? Maybe that cook told the truth when he said he fed a Marshal, but I'm sure the Marshal was dying to have some of his wife's cabbage soup all the time. A restaurant meal is nothing in comparison with a home-cooked meal."

The earth beneath our feet was a slippery mass of thin, crusty ice and slime. There was a dragging pain in our backs and our knees trembled from the strain of keeping a foothold. Every step was an effort.

But in the distance ahead, standing out in the clear, limpid, frosty air, the construction site, a boundless, flickering, glowing sea of light, loomed ever closer and ever brighter.

CONSULTATION

"Since you insist on hearing this story, I think I had better tell you, first, who Natasha is, round whom the events centre, and, second, about the background against which they unfold, although I confess, I don't see anything particularly interesting about it myself. Just the usual sort of thing."

The speaker was Nikolai Chumachenko, senior dredger and Komsomol organizer of one of the best suction dredge crews of the construction project. A demobilized gunner, Chumachenko had not lost any of the Guardsman's trim orderliness on his civilian job, and it was with a familiar gesture that he now, as he spoke, gave a pull to his neat army tunic on which two Orders of the Patriotic War were pinned side by side with the Order of the Red Star. But he was not allowed to finish. For the girl who was in the room with us, a short, plump, blue-eyed girl with captivating dimples in her round rosy cheeks, broke

impetuously into the conversation. She tossed back her flaxen curls, clasped her hands tragically, and only then came out with:

"Oh, what a bore! 'First, second!' What is there to explain? Natasha is the daughter of the leader of their dredge crew. Yes, the one we've all heard about. She's eleven months old now and she was eight months old in the spring when this happened. She was one of the first children to be born here, at the construction project, and their entire crew, the dredge crew, I mean, even Nikitich, the old boatswain who is certainly no ladies' man, are madly in love with her. It's gone so far that when Natasha has a light case of upset stomach, the whole crew is in a fever."

Through all this Chumachenko tried hard to preserve his disciplined coolness, but a smile, involuntarily appearing on his lean, sunburnt face, belied all his attempts.

"Just look at her," he said, "that's a young Soviet doctor for you. It's a good thing I'm never sick. I'd rather go to a village wise woman than to an M.D. as frivolous as this young woman.

"Now, about Natasha. It's true enough that she's the daughter of our crew leader and it's true that she fell ill that time, very ill. It was spring, the flood season, the busiest time of

the year for us, and there was a tremendous amount of work to be done. Now our crew leader is as hard as flint. I've seen him in the toughest spots and he never so much as turned a hair. And now here he was changing right in front of our eyes, a prey to something within him. He said nothing to anyone and went on working as usual, but we could see that all was not well. He was losing weight, his eyes had become red like a rabbit's and he was as taut as a string inside. But he never said a word about his daughter to anyone, he kept it all bottled up inside of him. The boys attempted to probe him, but it was no good. 'I'm all right,' he replied. 'Never mind me. Go on with your work and don't let this distract you.' He had become bristly and non-committal and as cold as ice. Well, when the boys saw that there was no getting it out of him, they left him alone. After all, it did not interfere with the work and our crew was ahead of the others as usual. And then, to tell the truth, there was this job to tackle, and we had our hands full. We had resolved to top the indicated output capacity of the dredge by fifty per cent for the May Day holidays. And we all put our shoulders to the wheel."

"They're liable to forget everything in the world for the sake of so many cubic feet of

earth an hour!" put in the girl bitingly, throwing a mischievous and ironic glance at the dredger.

The remark must have struck home, for he dropped his eyes guiltily and pretended not to have heard it.

"I'm not only a dredger, I also happen to be the Komsomol organizer. And I am not interested solely in my output, my 'cubic feet,' as she puts it, but in the men themselves. My guess was that, everything being shipshape at work, something at home had affected our crew leader. So I dropped in at his house one evening when he was at work, and then I knew. The baby was in a hopeless state (the doctors had given her up), the mother on the point of collapse, and the father spending every moment of his time in between shifts watching at the sick child's bedside. It scared me. The doctor here was right when she said that we all love Natasha. We do. She's a sweet child, grey-eyed, red-haired, a regular little flame. And there she was lying motionless on her back, and her face two great staring eyes, dark with pain. I thought of our crew leader, and fear filled my heart. Such a tragedy as this and him putting up a bold front. I decided to do what I could to help and the first thing that occurred to me

was the dispensary. I ran there.... It was night and the place was locked. I couldn't see the bell-button in the dark and banged away at the door. Remember, Doctor?"

"I remember. It isn't something one can easily forget. I was on duty that night and, there being no patients, had dozed off a little when I was wakened by a violent crash. I was wondering if it was not the high water flooding the dam when the nurse came running with the information that 'A madman's trying to break in, Doctor!' The next moment there he was before me. You should have seen him then. He was hatless, his clothes were all muddy and his face was streaming with perspiration. 'Bad news, doctor,' he panted, 'Natasha's dying!' Who Natasha was and what she was dying of he did not say. 'Come,' was all he said. 'Come? Where? Wait till I get the car!'

" 'No car can make that road. High water, and mud up to your knee.' And he was helping me on with my coat as he said it. It was a good mile and a half to the patient's house and it was all mud. We ran all the way. I lost my rubbers. But what are rubbers? High boots would not have done any good, either. Where the mud came above my knees, he picked me up in his arms and carried me over, the big

rear. I appeared at the patient's bedside looking as though someone had pulled me out of a pulp pipe; he didn't even let me get my bearings, he led me straight to the bed and said: 'Here's Natasha.'

"If anyone at medical school had ever suggested that I would be visiting patients in this way, I'd have laughed in his face. But there I was and there didn't seem to be anything out of the way about it. As soon as I had got my breath back, I washed and then examined the little girl. My diagnosis exactly coincided with that of my predecessors.

"The doctors had done what they could, but the disease was one which, as a rule, and especially when the patient is as young as Natasha, defies treatment.

"The little girl lay without stirring, the mother was petrified by grief, and Nikolai here—I thought him the child's father then—desperate, and imploring me again and again to work a miracle and save the child. When I told him I did not hold with miracles, he said doggedly that if only one wanted something very much, that something was sure to happen.

"And, would you believe it, he proved to be right: miracles, it seems, do happen. It came to my mind all of a sudden that at the time

I was doing practice work at our school clinic, there was much talk there about one of our professors, a noted academician and honoured worker of science, who was evolving a new method of treatment of this horrible disease.

"And so when Nikolai said what he did about miracles, I told him that I had heard of a new method of treatment but knew very little about it, for it was still in the stage of verification. And do you know what this young man, Order-bearer, honoured dredger, Komsomol leader, and all those other things he is, did? Speak out, you wretch, and tell him! Why are you blushing? He swung me, the doctor, off the floor and whirled me round the room."

The action was one that, in truth, could hardly be expected of cool and collected Chumachenko, but the deep flush that stood out suddenly through the dark tan of his face, was proof that the doctor had not exaggerated.

"In the presence of the sick child and her mother, mind you! It was utterly uncalled for, you will agree, utterly. After that everything happened just like in Chekhov's story *Horsy Name*, the difference being that there the story centred round the bad tooth of a bored gentleman of leisure, while here the life of a lovely baby was involved. I tried but could

not quite recall what the new method consisted in. I became convinced that some of the most important details had escaped me and that perhaps I had not really known them. And, though therein lay no fault of my own, I was terrified lest the child die all because I had not been inquisitive enough as an intern.

"However, there was little time for remembering. Nikolai suddenly burst out with: 'Oh, never mind! What's important is that a method of treatment exists and is known to Soviet medicine. Do you know the telephone number of your clinic?' My spirits rose. I had written down in my note-book at parting some of my classmates' addresses and phone numbers and the number we wanted was undoubtedly among them. But would that do us any good? We were in the steppe country, and the clinic was in Moscow, at the other end of the world practically. It was the dead of night, and the high water had cut us off from even our local centre with its telegraph office and trunk-line. But this did not stop Nikolai. 'Doctor,' he said, 'let's dash over to the hydro-mechanization office, there's a telephone there! The rest is my responsibility.' A terribly self-assured person, isn't he?"

"I have faith in the Soviet people. What has self-assurance got to do with it, anyway?

I knew the number of the clinic, a telephone was at hand and a doctor beside me, and not a bad doctor, as we later found out, though, frankly speaking, her pug nose and especially those curls did not, at the time, inspire me with much confidence."

"I suppose I shall have to begin wearing glasses to make the right impression on 'crack-brains,' as the nurse at the dispensary puts it, like these. Well, as soon as we had reached the telephone, my 'crack-brain' picked up the receiver and got the inter-town connection.

" 'Operator,' says he in a voice that was so honeyed it was sickening, 'hello. This is me, Chumachenko, of the Komsomol dredge crew.' The crew, you see, have a long-standing friendship with the telephone operators whose permanent and distinguished clients they are. Messages of greeting and congratulation are always being phoned and wired in to them from all corners of the country. In this case, however, when Nikolai said he wanted to make a long-distance call, he was refused. According to the rules, the subscriber must come in person to the telephone office, make an advance payment and get his order registered. Rules are rules, anyone can understand that, but what is one to do when one is cut off from

civilization by high water? Nikolai, however, was nothing daunted. You must have heard that he is a splendid agitator, and he is. He was most eloquent as he explained that Soviet laws and rules were only made to make people happier and that when the life of a human being was at stake rules could well be changed. The telephone girls were moved to tears when he told them about the sick child, and they hit on a way to help us without breaking the rules: they paid for the call with their own money."

"I got Moscow," Chumachenko said, picking up the story where the doctor had left off, "and was connected with the number I wanted. The doctor on duty at the clinic answered the telephone. I was so disappointed I groaned when he told me that the professor I wanted to consult was taking a cure at a Sochi resort. And this young woman here, do you know what she did? She burst out crying and couldn't stop. To top it all, and this is often the case with the trunk-line, just when I had got to the most important point of my conversation, there was a crackling noise and while I was shaking the receiver and blowing into it, a lifeless voice announced: 'Hang up, please. Your time is up.' I was furious. I fairly seethed when I said: 'How dare you inter-

rupt? A human life is at stake. This is the Volga-Don, a famous construction project, speaking!' I never expected these words would prove so effective. That same lifeless voice from the Moscow trunk-line came back with: 'The Volga-Don? Just a moment. Here's your number again.' The doctor on duty at the clinic knew me now, and when I had gone on with my explanations he said that the method I was talking about had recently been introduced into medical practice, but that, being a specialist on bone tuberculosis, he knew little about it and could not help me. He was terribly annoyed when I requested the address of the sanatorium where the professor was staying. 'You must be mad,' he roared, 'the old man is having a badly needed rest. He can't possibly be disturbed!'

"But I had mentally analyzed my success with the icy-voiced telephone girl, knew that the word 'Volga-Don' was a magic one and thought it would not hurt to try it on the doctor. 'What do you mean you won't give us the address,' I said, 'this is the Volga-Don speaking.'

" 'The Volga-Don? You don't say! Are you really from the Volga-Don?'

" 'Yes, really,' I said. 'You should see the view I have right now of one of the most

famous of the flood-gates!' I heard the hurried rustling of paper over the phone and then the doctor's voice saying: 'Here's your address. Write it down. Sochi, Seaside Sanatorium, Room 3.' And then, 'I'm sorry, I didn't know you were from the Volga-Don.' "

"We had the address at last! I was terribly happy," the young doctor interrupted, furtively brushing away a tear from her long lashes. "But here was another problem. Our telephone time was up. The girls from our trunk-line office had, it appeared, used up all their capital and could not prolong the call. Nikolai virtually went on his knees to them. 'Girls,' he begged, 'please do something. Borrow the money if necessary. You'll each get a bottle of *Magnolia* perfume from me tomorrow if you do.' That last about the perfume was terribly tactless of him, of course, and the girls let him know it. Quite right, too. But they ran off somewhere and got the money just the same. When the telephone rang again, the Seaside Sanatorium, Sochi, was on the line. Nikolai was overjoyed and barked out: 'The Volga-Don speaking!' "

"Those weren't my precise words," Chumachenko interrupted, "but, of course, I did want to shake up whoever it was on the other end of the line and said that I was from the

Volga-Don Construction Project and had to speak to Academician so and so at once. The voice that replied to me was kindly and seemed to belong to an old lady. 'This is the middle of the night,' she said, 'and the academician is in bed. Besides, he is not an academician or a professor here. He is our guest and we can't disturb him. We have one day in the week reserved for out-of-town calls, and that is Sunday, from four to eight p.m.' This got my dander up. 'I see,' said I, 'you people say a lot of pretty words at meetings about aid for the great construction projects, but you don't do anything about it.' This cut the old lady to the quick. 'What have construction projects,' she said, 'got to do with specialists on children's diseases?'

" 'Everything,' I said. 'Do you think that our giant machines are operated without manpower? It's the people who do the work and those people have children and the children may occasionally be ill, dangerously so, and, perhaps, even dying.' The old lady was beginning to weaken. 'I don't know what to do,' she said, 'our rules are very strict.' 'Think no more about it,' I insisted, 'wake up the professor and tell him the Volga-Don wants him. Let him decide.' And would you believe it? In just about a minute I heard an old man's

coarse bass over the phone, saying: "Well, who's there from the Volga-Don? What's happened? This is Professor so and so.' "

The young doctor smiled.

"Nikolai quailed then," she said, "and shoved the receiver into my hand. There was nothing to be done, and I gave the history of the case as best I could, and, you know—I'm very proud of this—the professor commended me for the accuracy of my diagnosis and for having brought him into consultation. He told me what to do and gave the prescriptions. He spoke unhurriedly and at length and covered all the details. Attempts to cancel the connection were made several times, but the professor himself coming out with the magic word 'Volga-Don,' our call was renewed. At the end I thanked him for having been so marvellous to us and asked him to forgive me for having disturbed him. This suddenly made him very cross. 'You should be ashamed of yourself, Doctor,' he said. 'Call me up if you need me, by all means. I'm only too glad to do the little I can to help the builders of the country's great construction project.' And he made me promise to let him know the results of the treatment. The rest was simple. We have an excellent hospital here and a good pharmacy. I phoned the pharmacy and ordered every-

thing I wanted. Nikolai rowed a boat across the Don in the midst of ice-floes to get the drugs I'd ordered. What's most surprising is that the whole business took less than two hours. Towards morning I gave the little girl her first injection, after which Nikolai, far too much in a hurry to be polite, escorted me to the dispensary and himself set off at a run for the trench to give the good news to Natasha's father and take the shift over."

"Well, and how did it all end?"

The two young people glanced at each other. The doctor looked down and blushed and the dredger turned to the wall to examine with sudden interest the oblong spot on the still wet plaster. Then, unable to resist the impulse, they burst out laughing: she, loudly and gaily, in the way of all open-hearted, high-spirited people; he, quietly and with restraint.

"It ended happily," Chumachenko said. "Natasha recovered. Our dredge crew sent the professor a telegram congratulating him on the success of his method and thanking him for his help."

"And Nikolai and I recently moved into these rooms," the doctor continued. "The house is a new one. Its other half is occupied by the leader of the dredge crew and his family, and

this one was given to us. Would you like to see Natasha?"

The doctor went out, reappearing a minute later with a plump little girl in her arms. The little girl looked everyone over with serious grey eyes and suddenly stretched out her round little arms toward the Orders that shone on Chumachenko's neat tunic. She laughed out, showing four large upper teeth and two small lower ones. Her happy crowing rang through the room.

"Da-da, da-da!"

"She knows me," the dredger said with a pleased smile, adding, "our boatswain, an amusing old man who is known to become tongue-tied in the presence of ladies, calls Natasha our match-maker."

The two young people exchanged glances, and I realized that only now had they said the most important thing of all the things they had wanted to say and of which they were still too shy to speak.

UNUSUAL CONCERT

It all began with a postcard to which Mikhail Silych Matveyev, celebrated soloist of a famous opera house, did not, at first, pay any particular attention. The singer was no longer young, fame had come to him years before and it was all he could do to glance through the extensive correspondence which arrived for him at the theatre. Besides, there was nothing special in the postcard. The Radio Committee was getting up a current listeners' choice broadcast, the requests coming this time from the workers and engineers of a great construction job on the Volga. Among the letters brought by the musical editor for Matveyev's selection there was one from the excavator operator Nikita Bozhemoy who asked the singer to render that old favourite, *Song of the Volga Boatmen.*

"He certainly knows how to pick them!" said Matveyev to the editor with his usual bluff good humour. "You may include the *Volga*

Boatmen in your programme. Let Nikita enjoy himself."

The song was one of Matveyev's own favourites. In times long past, the singer, then only an under-clerk in the service of the *Caucasus and Mercury* Steamship Company, sweating profusely in the cooped-up closeness of the gallery but with his heart soaring in ecstasy, had heard Chaliapin's interpretation of it. He was sorry, now, that he would have to sing this free and rolling song in a broadcasting studio, something he could never quite get accustomed to.

But this time, standing alone at the microphone, the singer suddenly pictured the unchained expanse of the Volga shores, familiar and dear to him from his childhood, and the construction project of which he had read so much in the papers and which rose dimly in his imagination as something of giant proportions and difficult to imagine. He saw great numbers of people and among them Nikita Bozhemoy whom, perhaps because of the excavator man's odd name, the singer imagined as a middle-aged Ukrainian who wore a low-collared embroidered blouse, had a prominent forehead, thinning hair and sad and watchful eyes with a sly twinkle in them. He even pictured Bozhemoy listening to him, his chin rest-

ing on his tanned fist and a smile lurking in his corn-coloured, luxuriant, drooping moustache.

Matveyev must have been carried away by his vision of the far-off construction project, for he sang in the empty broadcasting room as he had not sung for a long time at big concerts.

Several days later a letter arrived from Nikita Bozhemoy in which the operator said that he was an old lover of music, that he had heard the country's best singers, but that he had never before met with so fine a rendering of his favourite song. He asked Matveyev to visit the construction project and "launch the new summer theatre" there. At the end of the letter he said that, in gratitude to the singer, his crew had decided to top its own record the following month by excavating over 500,000 cubic feet of earth more than the previous month. "It'll be a sort of present from us to thank you for your splendid performance," the excavator man wrote. These last lines, added by way of casual information, thrilled and impressed the singer as none of his fans' numerous tokens of admiration had ever done. Neither the bouquets pressed upon him by gushing girls when he had appeared at the stage-door, nor the many cigarette cases, Palekh boxes, writing sets and wine glasses, with

and without inscriptions, profusely presented to him on the occasion of various jubilees, had ever delighted Matveyev as much as Nikita Bozhemoy's simple statement. Over 500,000 cubic feet of earth! Accustomed as he was to his loud success, the singer took a peculiar pleasure in that he had, in a sense, become party in a giant construction project.

It came as a surprise to his fellow-workers at the opera house when Matveyev, who had earned among them the reputation of being rather slow on the move, unexpectedly undertook to form a concert group. He went about it in a business-like manner, unhurriedly and happily, as though he were not a famous singer, but merely one of the men on an excavating crew fulfilling his brigade-leader's assignment. He even wrote Nikita Bozhemoy, informing him of the date of the arrival of the touring group, listing the participants and naming the numbers on the programme. In reply he received a letter of thanks from the head of the political department and a telegram from Nikita Bozhemoy which read: "Many thanks. Expecting you. Bozhemoy."

The arrivals were warmly welcomed. A crowd met them at the landing-stage. They were presented with flowers. Matveyev was pleased, but could not help looking round him

in an attempt to discover in the crowd of brown, sunburnt faces, a man with a drooping moustache and wearing a blouse with a low, corded collar. In the car, beside the head of the political department, he was unable to check his impulse and asked whether Bozhemoy had been among the welcoming crowd.

"Nikita Bozhemoy? He's down in the heading. Why, do you know him?"

"No, that is, I've heard of him, read about him in the papers," lied Matveyev without knowing just why he did so.

The cars in which the arrivals rode were followed by a whole caravan of lorries, carrying those who had come to meet them. However, the singer could not restrain a feeling of vexation when he learned that this man, whom he had never yet seen, was not among them.

"He's got a head on his shoulders, has Bozhemoy!" the head of the political department went on. "We're all proud of him. He's shown us production efficiency last month that simply stunned us. It isn't just a case of figures, though. Bozhemoy's a school in himself. He's——"

"Will he be at the concert?"

"Certainly. He and his crew. I had the whole second row of the right wing reserved

for them. Oh, yes, I'd clean forgotten. It was Bozhemoy, wasn't it, who persuaded you to come here?"

"Not that I wanted much persuading," Matveyev replied dryly, lapsing into a silence which he maintained for the rest of the way.

The momentary chagrin he had felt was growing into a sense of resentment against Bozhemoy. He, Matveyev, a singer of country-wide fame, had come here in answer to Bozhemoy's invitation and had brought along a splendid group of performers, and the excavator man had not even seen fit to come to meet him. It could not be that at a construction undertaking of such dimensions, stretching endlessly on both sides of the road all through the half hour's ride by car, there was no one to take his place. Even the theatre could, on occasion, find substitutes for its performers, who were so much more difficult to replace. The singer promised himself on no account to look at the second row of the right wing.

Nor did he, when, wearing his tail-coat, he walked out with a light step on to the summer stage roofed in by an elegant covering, in the form of a shell. Radiating away from the stage, the rows climbed the slopes of a hill.

The back rows, merging with the blackness of the forest growing on the hill top, seemed to lose themselves in the dark. The deep star-studded sky formed the ceiling of the amphitheatre. But the shell-like enclosure afforded a splendid resonance. The singer's well-modulated voice, mellow and velvety on the higher notes, rolling out thunderously on the lower, easily covered the endless rows and, carrying away into the distance, died down in the forest or came back again, a ringing echo.

The people cramming this huge natural theatre were so whole-heartedly receptive to the music, so sensitive in their appreciation and so generous in their applause, that Matveyev was soon in the best of spirits again. He forgave the excavator man the slight he had suffered at his hands and, on concluding his song, turned to look with a sly, good-natured smile at the front rows on the right. He had no difficulty in discerning these rows, illumined as they were by the reflection of the stage lights. In this vast open-air hall filled with a multitude of people, the second row struck the eye with the gaping darkness of its several unoccupied seats.

In the seats next the empty ones, Matveyev could make out the fullish figure of a rather pretty woman, her head crowned by heavy

braids, a sunburnt girl beside her and several other women sitting next to them. Matveyev realized that the vacant seats belonged to the excavator operator and his friends. They, who had been so pressing and earnest about inviting him, disdained to attend his concert. A chill struck at the singer's heart, but, in a moment, the feeling of injury was dissolved in the friendliness of the listeners' response. Beneath the starry sky the applause rang out, stormy, warm, compelling. Forgetting Bozhemoy, Matveyev felt as if a huge wave of common joy were sweeping him away with all these tanned, weather-beaten people whose hearts responded so keenly to his every note. Unable to resist the eager insistence of his audience, he sang again and again without sparing his voice.

Much later, when they had at last let him go and, thrilled and happy, he had run as lightly as a young man off the stage, wiping the beads of perspiration off his forehead, the women he had earlier caught sight of in the second row, pushed their way to his side. The tallest among them, dark complexioned, a pair of plaits crowning her head, handed him a large bouquet of roses which seemed to ooze drops of morning dew out of their petals, and said in melodious tones:

"These are from Nikita Bozhemoy."

"And these from his crew," burst out her young and slender companion. Thrusting her flowers into the singer's hand and blushing painfully, she dived behind her friends.

The rest silently handed the singer their bouquets. He now had a whole armful of roses.

"And where is Nikita Bozhemoy?" Matveyev asked, hiding his face in the heavy, sweet-smelling flowers.

"He asked me to say how sorry he was. I'm his wife. He's terribly upset because he couldn't come to meet you or attend your concert. The man who was to take over the shift from him fell ill, and the work just couldn't wait. They're filling in the cross-piece and autumn's on our heels." Smiling, the woman suddenly lapsed into Ukrainian, "You must forgive my husband, he's quite unhappy because he couldn't come to meet you. He can't leave his job for a moment. I even take his meals to him."

"Where in the world did you find such lovely flowers here?"

"Nikita grew them himself. He adores flowers. He's picked all the flowers in our garden for you."

The singer's heart warmed to the words. Why hadn't it entered his head earlier that here there were sometimes hours and days

when one had to sacrifice one's most cherished personal desires to the common work? Ashamed of his egoism, the singer now only wanted to see his correspondent as soon as possible, shake hands with him, become his friend.

After the concert, the administration was giving a supper for the visiting artistes. But Matveyev flatly refused to take his seat at the table and persuaded his hosts to show him the construction site.

It was night, but with the help of floodlights the work went on as in the day-time. Matveyev's escort, a young engineer from Moscow and a music lover, now and then broke off his explanations of the significance of this or that construction job to dwell at length on vocal art. Matveyev listened to him absent-mindedly.

Here, on this formerly empty reach of the Volga bank, where, in the days of his early youth, there had been nothing but an old barge used as a landing-stage, a huge construction job was under way. The singer did not even attempt to picture all the engineer told him. He had a keen musical ear, and everything spreading before his gaze reached him in the form of a mosaic of sound, strange and verified, which merged into a mighty, flow-

ing, solemn symphony. Somewhere here, in this deluge of sound, adding its voice to the symphony, was Nikita Bozhemoy's excavator, run by the man himself, a lover of music who had given up the concert for a pressing order that could not be postponed.

The singer, his ear alive to the rush of sound, heard a high girlish voice breaking through the din and dominating it. The voice, carried all over the trench by a loud-speaker, said the most ordinary things: it ordered one of the men to speed up the work of the dumper, told another to report at once to the engineer on duty and upbraided a third for failing to deliver the full amount of concrete to sector three. The usual daily round. But, to the singer, the voice seemed to be that of a giant who commanded this whole mighty, complex mass of roaring, clanging, chugging machinery.

"Who's that?" he asked.

"That's Nyura Kapustina, the assistant dispatcher," his escort replied. And he resumed his explanations in the tone of a guide showing a visitor round a museum.

"Radios have been installed all over this trench. We broadcast our instructions to the builders. Hear that?"

The trench reverberated to the sound of the girl's voice.

"Leader of motor column, leader of motor column! Wake up! You are holding up delivery. Bozhemoy won't stand for it, remember!"

"Can they hear her voice all over?"

"Certainly. All over the trench," the engineer replied, surprised to detect a note of excitement in his guest's question. "I remember hearing you for the first time in the opera *Ivan Susanin.* I was only a youngster then."

"Look, what if I were to sing over your network right now?" Matveyev suddenly asked. "I mean it. Why do you look at me like that? I'm going to sing for Nikita Bozhemoy and all those who are working now and couldn't attend my concert. What do you say?"

"Oh, no. Our broadcasting room's just a cubby-hole," his companion broke out in alarm. "A bird-cage. No acoustics to speak of."

"You can't possibly stop me. Come on. Where is she, that bright-voiced Nyura of yours?" Matveyev returned in a tone of command. He was filled with a mischievous gaiety that seemed to take twenty years off his age.

Several minutes later Nyura Kapustina's familiar voice which had, however, lost some of its self-assured, imperious notes, gasped out in one breath:

"And now we are going to hear People's Artiste Mikhail Silych Matveyev who will sing

for the workers of the night shift. He will sing ... I'm sorry, Comrades, I don't know just what. He'll tell you that himself. Don't forget to stay tuned! Comrade Matveyev is on the air!"

Breaking through the roar of motors and concrete carriers, the long-drawn clanging of rams driving sheet piles into the ground, the rasping of scrapers and the grating of power shovels—through this symphony of creative labour—came Matveyev's powerful, soaring bass. Joyously, with a gay recklessness, the song of the boatmen sounded over the building site; that gallant patriot Ivan Susanin spoke to his motherland in his last hour; the satanic laughter of Mephistopheles rolled across the trench; the bold Yeremka from Serov's opera delighted Russian folk with his airy stanzas about the merry holiday of Shrovetide.

A strange concert it was. The pauses between the songs and arias were filled in by a girl's excited voice telling an inefficient foreman that he was wanted by the superintendent, informing the excavator operators that the motor column had been reinforced, and, for the third time, requesting a Comrade Klimov to report to the engineer on duty. And then again the loud-speakers carried the sing-

er's powerful, thunderous bass over the grounds.

His hands pressing on the levers of the power shovel, that lover of song Nikita Bozhemoy sat listening silently. The concrete placers listened as they laid the damp grey mass pouring from the bodies of the dumpers in the shields of the falsework. The electric welders listened, flashes of lightning breaking from the iron cages of the reinforcements. The engineer on duty listened, too. Still waiting for the elusive Comrade Klimov, he had sat down for a moment on an empty box in front of the loudspeaker and had frozen to his seat, enthralled.

The singer stood in the dispatcher's tiny booth, filling it with his robust form, his head all but propping up the ceiling. He had ripped off his starched collar and bow tie and thrust them in his pocket. The perspiration trickled down his broad face. He stood there, in that oppressive heat, and sang his favourite songs, one after another. He needed no accompaniment. He sang them with a joyful abandon, giving freely of the treasures of his magnificent voice.

He had never been so happy.

SHORES OF A NEW SEA

It was late when engineer Vysokov and I finished talking, and he suggested that I spend the night at his place. He said that he had rented a room in the house of a Cossack family and lived quite near, in a village recently transplanted to the shores of the new sea.

Our boat was ordered to the moorage and we were all ready to leave when, at the very last moment, Vysokov was called to an urgent conference with the head of the construction project. The engineer whistled.

"We'll be here half the night," he said. "Look, why don't you go on to my place alone? The boat's waiting, the man will show you the house, it's right on the shore, and I'll write a note to the owner so he'll know who you are."

No sooner said than done. Our fast-going craft, its powerful motor roaring, cut across the bay, whose placid waves were stained crimson by the last gleams of sunset. So great

was our speed that the hull of the launch was sent bouncing half out of the water, which rose in two glass-like walls receding to both sides of the stern.

Scaring off a flock of wild ducks that had made themselves at home on the young bay, the launch made a sharp turn, and, above a low precipice, a view of the village perched on the bare top of a broad hill, opened up before our eyes. Dusk was gathering over the bay, but the village streets, gently sloping down to the water, were still lighted. The village was clearly visible up to the broad square, which was enclosed on all sides by tall brick buildings.

Actually, the village looked little like one. Rather, it was a small town built in accordance with the rules of modern architecture. But the sounds that came to us from the direction of the hill were the usual village sounds of evening: the shrill crowing of roosters calling lustily to one another and the contented lowing of a large herd of well-fed cows which we could see plodding slowly along the streets, opalescent clouds of gold-flecked dust rolling behind them.

The town had a well-settled appearance, but the absence of pavements on some of the streets and the scantiness of verdure showed

that it was still young and had not had time to flourish properly. A fresh gusty breeze blew from the sea. Large waves tossed about beneath the steep bank, rustled the pebbles on the narrow strip of sandy beach, and with a soft smacking sound swayed the skiffs and boats of all forms and kinds which crowded at the numerous moorages like fish to bait.

Switching off the motor, the helmsman skilfully piloted our launch, its rumbling hushed now and its hull settled in the water, to one of the moorages.

The engineer's house was two steps away. To reach it, one had only to climb a clayey path that gave off a ringing sound beneath one's feet, to the steep bank overhead.

The master of the house, a tanned, thickset Cossack of that happy cast of countenance that keeps one guessing as to whether its possessor is forty or sixty years of age, greeted me in a manner I thought restrained, unhurriedly put on his glasses and ran through Vysokov's message, holding it a distance away from him as he read.

"Well, come in," he said. "This isn't the first time we've welcomed our tenant's friends here. He's got a store of them."

The man seemed preoccupied, even irritated, and made no attempt to conceal the fact

that he did not particularly fancy the appearance of a stranger in his house.

The fatiguing heat of day still lingered in the spacious rooms inside, their windows wide as those of a town house. Green flies, as deep-voiced as the strings of a double-bass, droned annoyingly just under the ceiling. All this suggested that it would probably be better to go out into the street where it was cool and there await Vysokov's coming.

"As you wish," my host readily agreed. He saw me out on to the porch and, removing his glasses, with an impatient glance searched the street, which was already losing itself in the deepening shadows. There was no one there, and it was with evident vexation that he snapped shut his spectacle-case.

"Perhaps you'd like to go down to the beach and look at the sea? Everyone who comes here goes into raptures over the view. It's the youngest sea in the world. They even filmed it a while ago. Hear it rumble?"

For a moment a little smile lit up the man's sunburnt face, but was at once replaced by the old expression of guarded preoccupation.

Slender acacias grew on the shore, and I heard the rustling of their leaves as I reached the familiar descent to the beach. The wind had

died down. Narrow strips of sunset, green and pink in hue, still flickered on the horizon, but the stars had already appeared and shone with dazzling brilliance in the darkening sky. A fog enveloped the sea, so dense and shaggy that only by the soft, recurrent plashing of the waves could one tell where the water was. Slowly the fog crept on, coiling heavily up the craggy shore and sending its fresh and humid breath into my face. The path beneath my feet seemed to have dissolved and I had to virtually grope my way down.

Suddenly the sound of a kiss coming with startling clarity from somewhere very close froze me to the spot. A pebble broke from under my foot and rolled down to the water. The air was rent by a woman's frightened little cry, and a man's calm voice saying: "What are you afraid of? Someone must be passing here, and welcome. We don't mean any more to him than he does to us."

For a moment two vague silhouettes appeared to my right, a man's tall one and a woman's, just a little shorter.

The nickel parts of a bicycle gleamed out dimly and vanished. I reached the water's edge, climbed into one of the boats and seated myself comfortably on a plank. It was here, I knew, that Vysokov's launch would moor.

The water was ebbing. The waves slapped against the sides of the boats with a new gentleness and the latter responded in a rich gamut of melodious voices. It was as if the water were striking not against the tarred, rough-hewn planks of the boats, but against the sounding boards of a variety of stringed instruments. The pair of lovers I had nearly frightened away had apparently remained where they were.

The sound of their voices, drifting to me, was muffled and only snatches of their conversation could be caught.

"Make up your mind, Zina, please," the man's voice insisted, "I've got the order in my pocket, and the boys are all packed and ready. My chief Vysokov got a wire from them yesterday saying that the suction dredge was there and asking us to send off the crew without delay. They're waiting for us, you understand, waiting...."

"It'll be all right with dad, I know," the girl's voice returned. "He'll be terribly angry at first, but he'll soon relent. It's mother I'm worried about.... I'm the last of her children to remain with her, Volodya. Vasya's in the army, Semyon's an engineer in Novosibirsk, Katya's an agronomist somewhere in the

Kulunda steppe, I wouldn't know where to find the place on the map...."

Several sentences were drowned out by the splashing of the waves and smothered by the fog which had now grown so thick that one's outstretched hand was lost to sight in its enveloping folds.

"...Call this love? You don't love me, Zina, not really. It's all child's play to you," the man's voice said loudly, and there was anguish in its tones.

"Oh, no, that's not so, Volodya," his companion exclaimed in alarm, "if ever I took things lightly, I don't any more. The world would be a dull place without you in it. But can't you understand that I'm like the last little leaf on a tree for mother and dad? I fly off, and the branches are left bare. You know how dad is. He's tied to this soil heart and soul. He's given all his strength to it. The collective farm's his whole life. When I said you wanted me to go to Zhiguli with you the other day, he swayed so that he had to grab hold of the door jamb to keep from falling. It was as though I had struck him a blow on the head with an axe."

"But what am I to do, Zina?" the man retorted, "I can't stall things any longer. The dredge is waiting and what a dredge! And

you.... Why did I ever have to meet you? Why did Vysokov have to invite me up to your house? The rest of the boys have all but grown wings, they're that eager to go, and I'm kept dangling at your skirts. You have the last word, Zina. It's for you to decide whether I'm to go to Zhiguli alone tomorrow or together with you. The plane takes off at dawn. I can't wait any longer." There was a tinkle as of the bicycle being picked up from the ground.

"Oh, I see. You love me so much you can't even wait any longer," Zina brought out in a quiet but stern and peremptory tone.

"Yes, that's how much I love you. Work must come first."

"It's a good thing you told me at last. I'll know now. Good-bye, Vladimir."

"Zina!"

"Good-bye. You'll find someone much better than me out there. Besides, you don't really need anyone. You'll have the biggest dredge in the world. That ought to console you."

"Zina!"

"That's my name. I've answered to it for eighteen years. You're sorry you ever laid eyes on me, are you? Well, I'm sorry too, very, very sorry. Good-bye!"

There came the springy tap-tap of light and energetic steps against the dry clay of

the path, their sound soon deadened by the fog.

"Zina!" the man cried out in despair, "Zina!"

The bicycle jangled as it was cast aside, and heavy boots scraped against the clayey soil of the slope; then, somewhere in the distance, the village dogs started up a frenzied barking, and when they too were still, only the irksome croaking of the frogs and the melodic slapping of the waves against the sides of the various craft disturbed the silence.

The cocks had crowed and the stars had shed their brilliance and were fading in the sky, which was beginning to turn a translucent green, when at last there sounded the vibrant chirring of a motor. It was stilled at once as it came nearer, and the swift vessel, sliding noiselessly out of the fog, drifted the last remaining feet to the moorage.

The conference with the construction head had dragged out far into the night. Vysokov, learning among other things that he was to be transferred to a giant new construction project, was so carried away with the news, that the sight of his guest meeting him here, by the boats, instead of in the house failed to surprise him. And when, in the fog, he stumbled on the abandoned bicycle, he swore and

passed it by as though it were the usual thing for him to find bicycles lying around neglected in the middle of the night.

The engineer's abode had, it appeared, its own entrance. We used that, coming in through the yard without disturbing our hosts. The light of a single lamp illumined the small room. Two narrow beds, arranged with a soldier's neatness stood alongside both walls, and a large table on which in meticulous order lay folders of paper, pencils and stacks of books, occupied the centre of the room. A bulky journal, opened in the middle, lay face down on one of the beds; over the other, hung a guitar and a large snap-shot, apparently cut out from some magazine, of a young man in naval uniform, but without shoulder-straps.

The young man had a round, good-natured face. A pair of eyes, narrowed to slits, gazed out from under the peak of his cap, which was pulled down low. On the blue of his jacket the battle Order of the Red Banner was pinned next to the Order of the Red Banner of Labour.

"Make yourself at home there, no one's using it," Vysokov said, pointing to the bed with the photograph.

"What about the someone it belongs to?"

"He won't be in. He hasn't been sleeping here for a week because of certain diplomatic

complications and an increasing number of border incidents."

And the engineer gave a meaning wink in the direction of the wall from behind which came the muffled voices of the hosts.

"That, by the way, is my best dredge crew leader," he added, pointing to the photograph. "Matveyev's the name. You've heard of him, of course? There he is in all his beauty. I pinned that up just to strike awe in the hearts of certain people."

"Why doesn't he sleep here?" I asked, beginning to put two and two together.

"That's a long story," the engineer replied unwillingly, "a tragedy of our times." And to further emphasize his reluctance to dwell on this tragedy he pulled his blanket up to his chin and wished me a good night.

The wish, however, failed to materialize. As soon as all was still in the room, the voices behind the wall which before were indistinct, suddenly became much clearer. They were the voices of two women and I at once recognized one of them as belonging to Zina. The other, pouring forth querulously, was of that low rich timbre that Cossack women past their prime so often have.

"... All right, go, go and leave father and me, leave the collective farm and the house,

leave everything. Much you care! What are you crying about? Feeling sorry? Then why don't you do something about it? Tears won't help any."

"Oh, Mother, I can't part from him, I'd like to, but I can't," Zina replied, and her voice, that had struck me with its imperiousness there, on the shore, now sounded as plaintive as a child's. "I love him so. I can't begin to tell you how much."

"What's so wonderful about him? As though you hadn't enough suitors on the farm! And such suitors. Take Fyodor Astakhov—our best combine operator, came out of the war with a battle Order and won another one harvesting grain. Every time I see him he asks about you. And there's Mikhail Kravchuk, a young man with brains and nice to look at, too. They called him Innovator of the Fields in the papers. Or ... why, any one of our boys is better than that homeless tramp of yours."

"Please don't talk like that, Mother."

"And why not, may I ask? It's true enough. He's a tramp and you can't deny it. Has he a home? No. He roams from place to place like a gipsy. He goes from one construction project to another. And he carries all his belongings around with him in a suit-case and in that knapsack of his. When I think of

Fyodor Astakhov who still has all of last year's grain stored up.... He's given his vegetables to the Home for Invalids, too, and he's bought a motorcycle with a side-car. And he dresses so on holidays that you'd take him for a famous actor."

"Don't Mother. 'Grain,' 'motorcycle.' As if we were living in the old days. I'm taking that plane tomorrow and that's all there is to it."

"You're doing what? Did you hear her, Father? Quick, isn't she? Taking a plane, indeed! Why, your father simply fumes at the collective-farm board meetings when they discuss anyone wanting to leave. Even if it's a stranger it upsets him. And to think of his own daughter wanting to do such a thing. I'm taking that plane, says she!"

"I'm not going away just to sell sunflower seeds at a market. I'm going to one of the country's biggest construction projects. And I wish you wouldn't shout at me like that. I've come of age now, and the law says——"

"You dare to speak to your mother like that? The law says! The very idea! I'll show you what the law says! To travel around with a sack on her back and not have a place anywhere she could call home! Like a cuckoo bird! No nest, no family, no nothing! That man

of yours has probably got his path strewn with the likes of you."

"Please, Mother! The country's great construction projects have been his life since the war and don't you forget it. There, do you hear that sound outside? That's the sea. We have the sea now in place of desert land where not even feather-grass grew before. And it's his work. He and I, we'll live together and we'll build together."

"A baby's what you'll build. And then he'll go to a place that's even farther away and you and your father and I—— Wait, Zina, where are you going? I won't let you!"

"No, no, don't try to keep me. I'll go anyway."

"Wait a minute, Mother." This came from the father who until then had not uttered a word, as though he had not been in the room. There was unconcealed sorrow in his voice.

"And you, Zina, sit down and listen to me. Your mother has said some things she shouldn't have. Vladimir is not a bad boy and it isn't right to be trying to find fault with him. But you mustn't only think about him. You must think about us. You're the only one of our children left with us. And we're no longer young. Old age is just around the corner. Sit down, child, sit down. It's only once in a life-

time that such things are discussed in the family."

"Oh, Dad, how can mother talk that way? He's such a fine person. He was wounded four times during the war, and he's so popular. Whenever we go to see a film, it's hello, Vladimir Semyonovich, and how do you do, Vladimir Semyonovich, from all sides."

"I'm not saying anything against him. We're not discussing him."

"And I can't see anything so bad about his travelling around so much, either. I'll travel with him. Only I'm not going to lug a rule around, like I did this summer. I'm going to finish special courses and become a geodesist."

"A geodesist? Your mother and I planned a better future for you, child, than to walk around with a tripod."

"Is it so bad to be a geodesist then? You drive a few stakes into the ground today, and tomorrow a building rises there, or a dam or a sluice. Where once was wilderness, there runs a canal or spreads a sea. A new little scar on the face of the earth, as Vladimir says."

"Oh, so that is what he says! And what about father and me? You don't give us a thought," Zina's mother broke in, bursting into loud sobs. She wept with uncontrolled

abandon as though lamenting the death of someone dear to her.

"Don't, Mother. If a branch breaks off, there's no gluing it on to the tree with water. You said he was a soldier, Zina. Well, I'm a soldier, too. I fought my way through four countries and I helped take Berlin. And all the while I was thinking about you, thinking how fine it would be to get the fighting over with and go back to the farm, to the work I have always loved. I wanted to rejoice over the good life we were building and to see my grandchildren grow up. That's what I kept thinking and wishing. And now, here's all this abundance, corn rearing up high as a wall on our irrigated fields, and cotton and rice. Why, the yield's so high, it's a problem trying to figure out where to store all our crops. And look at this brand-new house I've put up. It'll be a lonely house with the last of my daughters leaving it. We'll be hearing our footsteps echo through the empty rooms, mother and I."

Again there came the sound of a woman crying.

"Now that Zina's joined in, it's a duet," said the old Cossack with a cheerless laugh. "Well, Zina, you must make up your mind. You're a baby no longer."

"My mind is made up."

"It's final then? You won't feel sorry later?"

"No."

"What do you say, Mother?"

"Oh, I don't know. She's you all over again. Terribly stubborn. I had hoped she'd marry Fyodor. She's had some education and she's got a head on her shoulders. With all the new things we have here, water in our furrows and cotton and rice, there's plenty of opportunity to amount to something. It would mean honours for herself and joy for the collective farm and comfort for you and me. But Zina——"

"That's enough. We've done with all that," said the father in as firm a voice as he could summon. "Where's that land digger of yours hiding? I heard he was staying at Kolya Zlobin's. Or perhaps he's taken that plane already?"

"Oh, no, Father. He's sitting on the bench outside, waiting."

"What's he waiting for? Has he been there all night?" her mother asked, and there was a woman's curiosity in her still tearful voice.

"He is waiting for my answer," Zina proudly replied.

"Haven't you given him your answer yet?"

"How could I without having consulted you? I told him I'd do what my parents

wanted," the girl replied, not without a certain cunning. "You must decide what I am to tell him, Dad."

"No one like you for obedience, eh? Well, Mother? Shall we call this dredger of hers in? He must be soaked in dew."

"I don't know what to say. Life is so good here and there're so many fine young men around. Oh, all right, call him in here, blast him, I wish I'd never laid eyes on him. I chased him out the door, and in he comes again through the window. Go and call him, but wash your face first and fix your hair. You're a sight. You can't go out looking like that."

"Oh, what does it matter?"

Light heels tap-tapped in the entrance-way, the door banged, the steps of the new porch gave a cheerful squeak. From the street, wafted in through the open window, together with great draughts of the cool, damp air, there came the sound of two familiar young voices, vibrant with excitement and a new joy.

"... They've given us the sea, they brought water to our thirsty fields. And it's this sea that will carry away so many of our young people.... Ah, the way of things!" came with a sigh from the old Cossack behind the wall. Then, in a tone of surprise, "Look, Mother, it's

daylight already, and we hadn't even noticed. Life is like that. With all its cares and duties, it passes before we know it."

Yes, day had indeed broken, rising beyond the window like a rosy wall. It was very quiet, as it usually is when nature gives birth to a new day; and, sounding clear in the soft stillness, came the ceaseless swish and rumble of the sea, so strange and unexpected in those boundless steppes.

HISTORIC SOUNDS

Our newsreel group, whose praiseworthy but difficult task it had been to record on film step by step the process of the birth and development of one of the greatest post-war construction projects, were staging a hearing of the noises and sound effects they had recorded.

The hearing was held at the local hotel. The room where we gathered was small and so crowded that there was hardly any breathing space. The builder was honoured by having the only arm-chair available, which stood in the corner by the table. For greater effect the lights were switched off.

All of a sudden, the noises, which had become as much a thing of habit with all of us as the air we breathed, broke upon the room. I had never supposed that a thing as simple and matter-of-fact as a sound track could evoke in the imagination whole scenes of construction. The various sounds now fused

in one single gamut, now fell apart into distinct and separate voices.

There came the tense and rhythmic rumble of a steam ram driving a steel sheet pile into the ground, of the metal groaning but yielding to the stubborn blows. The electromotors of the walking excavator hummed softly. One felt the giant machine to be working smoothly and easily, and heard the ladle chains clanging dully and the earth dropping on to the dumps with a thud that reminded ex-soldiers of the tight burst of an exploding mine. The gears of the suction-dredges gave off a steady grating sound. Abrupt words of command, the raucous drone of a giant cutter, a curse escaping the boatswain's lips fell on our ears. We could even make out the soft gasp of the earth slipping down the undermined slopes. The motors of mighty bulldozers roared deafeningly, their lethal blades scraping against the hard ground. Grunting, the scraper swept the rock into the ladle and the signal horns of the concrete carriers trumpeted out in alarm. Drowning out all these sounds, dominating them, echoing over the trench, came the matter-of-fact voice of the dispatcher. It broadcast instructions, shifted squads of men and machines,

and seemed to conduct this whole huge orchestra of mechanic sound.

"Colossal! Stupendous! Man the creator and builder ruling over all these rasping, roaring, clanging, rumbling steel giants!" the boyish voice of the artist piped out suddenly in the dark. Never without his pencils and folder, the artist had in the last few weeks been seen wandering over the site, and the builders had stumbled upon him where he was least expected.

"Hush! We're listening!" several voices hissed in reply.

The sound record of events that had taken place during the last week was heard next. These noises, like the ones that came before them, had sounded their last and were not to recur. There was the head of the project issuing instructions through the loud-speaker, his voice calm as he said:

"Clear the trench. We are going to open the flood-gates and admit the Don waters through the dam."

There came the light jangling of the travelling crane's pulley blocks, the creaking of lifted gates, the plashing of the water as it flowed into the tailwater, cautious at first and as though groping its way, then rapidly gaining strength and turning into a surging,

raging tide, and, finally, drowning out the water's roar, an explosion of human joy, shouts, hand-clapping, exultant whistling, with which the builders met the first wave that splashed down into the giant concrete cup.

And then another sound picture—that crucial moment when Soviet man the creator said to the mighty river: you will obey my will and do what I tell you, you will turn off from your age-old path and follow a new one!

It was a moment that made history.

The recording left us spell-bound. We heard the excited voice of the district head, a splendid engineer and enthusiast, addressing the builders, speaking to them of the great Soviet people and the Communist Party and then ordering them to dam the Don.

In reply there came the rumbling of many powerful machines, their mighty voices merging into a single boom as, their bodies loaded with rocks, they drove up on to the wooden platform in an endless string.

The boulders crashed down again and again, their thunderous descent merging with the savage roar of the torrent, and it was as though we could see this battle that men were waging against the frenzied river, a battle of life and death.

Slowly the strength of the river ebbed and its voice was changed. Its currents were tamed and flowed gently. The vanquished river resisted no more.

Once again, but in tones that were quiet now and touched with fatigue, the district head announced:

"Congratulations, Comrades! Due to your efforts, the work was done in eight hours and fifty minutes instead of thirty-five hours originally planned."

At this, those present in the room forgot their promise to maintain silence. Applause broke out, and many people spoke up at once.

"Marvellous! Simply marvellous!" someone cried, "Just think! All this is part of history already. It won't be repeated."

"Oh, yes, it will. Not once, but many times and on a grander scale," another interrupted. "But what's of paramount importance is that Soviet men in the year two thousand and something will be able to feel the breath of our times, to hear the voices of the builders, to sense our strength and our joy and realize how great was our perseverance in battling for a bright tomorrow."

"Well, what do you say? How did you like it?" one of the film directors, a woman, asked, turning to the builder at the table.

He was silent.

Someone turned the switch, the room was flooded with light and we saw that this man, who had always amazed everyone by his imperturbability, now sat dazed and shaken, his hands clutching the table.

What a moment to have put on the lights!